Memories of the Mekong

& Other Stories

A brief human history of the initial development period in Vietnam and Cambodia 1988 - 2007

By Christopher A. Jones

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One Planet One People Please

Preface

This book is a brief human history of the early development period in modern IndoChina, especially in Vietnam and Cambodia, as personally experienced by the author.

The period spanned from the days when Vietnam first reopened its doors to foreigners in January 1988, through to when it signed the World Trade Organisation Treaty in January 2007, thus bringing it onto the world's commercial stage. Since that time there has been a huge leap forward for the region and its people.

The initial development period was a time of hardship, excitement, and adventure that will never come again.

All the stories are true...even the tall ones.

C. A. Jones

Author

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Exotic Vietnam

Smooth, shiny, summer silks may easily catch your eye
With vibrant colours, as many laughing girls go by
So young and free, not thinking of the passing years,
Or those myriad of other haunting aging fears
That mirror the fragile birth and death of man.
Such qualms do not at all affect exotic Vietnam
For either today or, indeed, tomorrow.
Sensuous, sweltering and swollen monsoon skies
With life's promise and happy hope that underlies
All natural growth and people's busy, noisy lives.
To eat and drink and love and never compromise,
Or think that one day you too grow old and die,
Instead you live for 'now' and never waste a sigh
For either today or, indeed, tomorrow.
Such sounds so softly rustle your straining ear
That strives to catch the breathe of life that floats so near
And yet so far from all the time your dreams will need
To realise, and the then allow, your strong, enduring seed
To settle and fulfil your fervent and very great desire
To leave for lasting memory your brood of sacred sire
For either today or, indeed, tomorrow.
Stealthy, slinky, subtle, cats that sniff the evening breeze
With feminine feline charms that go so far to ease
Your daily mindless grind in this big city not so very kind
Or understanding to your simple Western ways and mind.
How sweet to love and play and never need to borrow
From some other's person's dream, or suffer any lasting sorrow
For either today or, indeed, tomorrow.

Memories of the Mekong

The mighty Mekong may not be as old, demographically speaking, or as historical as the Nile, but what it lacks in old, it compensates with bold. What it loses in history, it gains in colour. Like the seasons, the Mekong changes constantly. One feels that Mark Twain, while navigating his steamboat on the faraway Mississippi, would have been at home with the ever shifting sandbanks, depths and shallows of the monsoonal Mekong. Equally, Captain Marlowe chugging up the steamy Congo in his tin pot steamer in search of the elusive Trader Kurtz in Conrad's epic novella, *'The Heart of Darkness'*, would have appreciated the varying shades and shallows of the soul of the Mekong.

The Frenchmen, Lagree and Garnier, the first two Western surveyors of the Mekong from 1866-68, had no such navigational or humanistic problems that Malowe had to overcome. There were no cannibals on the Mekong! And in their time Pol Pot and his deadly Khmer Rouge were not yet manifest. They kept their journeys sweet and simple by completing them in small dugout canoes. These days not much remains to remind us of the early intrepid Spanish, Portuguese and, particularly, French, influence along the Mekong. All has been mostly washed away with the incessant heavy rains that occur from June to November each and every year. Long gone and without local regret are the colonial empires of the past. With the sad exception of Tibet, the remaining countries of the Mekong finally belong to their rightful owners.

The Mekong is the largest river in South East Asia; it washes China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam with its life-giving waters. Some 70 million people live from its bounty. The River has many names and faces as it slides its 4,500km journey from Qin Hai Province in the now Chinese Tibetan Himalayas situated at an altitude of some 4,650 meters, to the South China Sea, flowing out a little to the north of the Gulf of Thailand. Qin Hai Province is the home of the Khampa Nomads, whose traditional lifestyle is now threatened by the many modifications being introduced from the relentless churning industrial bases located throughout eastern China.

In Tibet the locals know the Mekong as 'Dzachu', and over the past decades the River has witnessed significant sufferings among these people, who continue to endure both cultural and physical oppression from their Han Chinese overlords. But they are a hardy lot. I used to sit in little mountain cafes imbibing hot sweet tea from mostly well-marked and heavily chipped drinking vessels while watching stooped figures slowly walking up steep and rocky hillside tracks carry huge bundles of firewood tied to their backs. Imagine doing that work day-in-day-out I used to muse to myself.

A little farther south in Yunnan Province, the natives know the Mekong as the 'Lancang Jiang' and here starts the first of the aggressive Chinese programs to dam it in order to provide electric power. I found the Chinese to be a cold, and efficient force compared to the ever friendly and chaotic people of Vietnam, where I liked to spend most of my time. The Chinese and Vietnamese may have come from a similar ethnic group, but now they were very different people in their collective outlook. Once I went across the Vietnamese northern border into China at a small central border town known as Lao Cai. The Chinese in their corresponding cleaner, more organised town just across the stream that marked out the border held the Vietnamese in open distain. There was no love there. After a few hours in that part of 'organised' China I was happy to get back into Lao Cai and lose myself among the noisy, disorganised, but ever cheerful Vietnamese.

The Mekong is the largest river in South East Asia; it washes China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam with its life-giving waters.

The downside of China's many dam projects is the increased drying up of the lower reaches of the Mekong after the monsoons end.

In fact, the story of the upper reaches of the Mekong is becoming synonymous with the expansion of Chinese regional dominance, not only in the form of an imported foreign culture and dam projects. The Chinese are now opening new casinos throughout the Golden Triangle, where the mountains of Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos all meet up in wild and heady confusion. Already Thailand's Chiang Rai Province is all aglow with the garish lights of numerous new casinos, as investors rush to cash in onto the new found wealth of the growing numbers of the brash Chinese gamblers who are starting to infest the region.

The downside of China's many dam projects is the increased drying up of the lower reaches of the Mekong after the monsoons end. On occasions, in the dry season, it is now impossible for any cruise boat to enter the Tonle Sap, the largest lake in SE Asia, located in Cambodia due to the shallow water encountered at its mouth. The lake even changes its direction of flow during the wet and dry seasons! I once suffered personally from this. I had incorporated a company run by a friend, Swiss Thomas that operated river cruises up and down the Mekong from Saigon to Siem Riep. Generously he rewarded me with a free cruise for my work. However, unfortunately, we had to by-pass the Tonle Sap segment by bus due to its unseasonably low water levels. It was due to the effect of the Chinese dams; of that we were all convinced.

The changes in the ecology caused by effects of the Chinese dam projects along the upper reaches of the Mae Nam Kong, as the Mekong River is known in Thailand, is severely affecting traditions and established livings in local Thai fishing villages such as Chiang Khong. Despite some pressure on the Mekong Commission, it has had little or no effect in halting the crashing forward momentum of the Chinese infrastructure developments in the region.

Maybe the industrious Chinese have another agenda on their minds besides generating yet more hydro electricity. If so, they are certainly not telling the rest of the world about any of their deep, dark secrets that drive them along so industriously like so many worker bees.

Along the River in the Shan State in Myanmar, the Lahu minority people in the region face their own challenges. They are being forced into service with the army in order to try to combat the massive drug production industry that ranks in size alongside similar industries in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the Lahu claim the Myanmar Army itself is the leading protagonist in drug production yet another of life's little ironies. No doubt Captain Marlowe and Huckleberry Finn in their personal voyages of moral discovery on the Congoand Mississippi Rivers respectively could have learned something from time spent on the Mekong in this region.

Making a Living on the Mekong

The Mekong runs through about 1,900 kilometres of Laos territory. Within Laos is located the only major drop in elevation along the Mekong, or the Menam Khong, as the River is known locally. In a place called the Khone Falls, the centre of the Laos fishing industry, the Mekong drops some thirty metres over a ten kilometre stretch. Surprising to some, at the height of the monsoonal effect in that region around November each year, the Khone Falls is said to boast the third largest volume of water of any falls in the world. In Laos the Mekong can reach a breath of 14 kilometres and contain many islands, especially at Done Khone in Champasak province, the home of many white water dolphins.

In nearby Vientiane, the somnambulistic capital of an equally sleepy Laos, one can soon encounter the 'Friendship Bridge' that now spans the Mekong, joining Laos to Thailand. It was built courtesy of Australian taxpayers as an Australian aid project to the region. However, in the mid 1970's, well before the multinational magnificence of the bridge, things were very different. I recall sitting in a broken-down cane chair on a hill side outside of Nong Khai in Thailand drinking the local Mekong brand whiskey, which isn't too bad a drop, and being the only witness to the unenviable fate of the many refugees cowering from the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in adjacent Cambodia. They crammed themselves into

November each year, the Khone Falls is said to boast the third largest volume of water of any falls in the world.

Riverside Squatters Hanging on for Dear Life

Development in Cambodia in recent years has been rapid, mainly because of the huge influx of international aid

filthy river camps and clung like leeches along the Laotian side of the Mekong River's edge just happy to be alive.

In 1978, while the world stood by and watched Pol Pot murder approximately two million of his own people in a ruthless and vain attempt to stop time and human progress, Vietnam finally acted. The ferocious Khmer Rouge had taken to crossing into Vietnam and killing innocent villagers, a rather foolhardy thing to do seeing that Vietnam then had a battle-hardened veteran army that was the fourth largest in the world. But the Khmer Rouge was beyond restraint or reason. The end result was a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the final end to Pol Pot's reign of terror. Since then peace and prosperity are once again retuning to the people of Cambodia. These people are easily distinguished from their Vietnamese neighbours. They have broader, darker faces and prefer the checked headscarf to the ubiquitous conical hat (known locally as the 'non le') found throughout the village communities of Vietnam. The culture and language of the Cambodian people emanate from India rather that from China.

A Humble but Happy Life for Many

Development in Cambodia in recent years has been rapid, mainly because of the huge influx of international aid, and because the Cambodian Government is much freer than its equivalent in Vietnam in allowing foreign ownership of property. Initially when crossing the border at Vinh Xuong Vu on the Vietnamese side of the Mekong River and at Kaam Samnar on the Cambodian side one could notice an immediate difference in development in favour of the Vietnamese. However, in recent years this balance seems to have changed. Nevertheless, Vietnam, with its huge population of 90 million people, compared to Cambodia's 15 million, still remains the 'big boy on the block'.

The rather nostalgic and exciting days of being greeted on the Cambodian side of the border by a broken down old bus with no windows and doors and being ferried in a bouncing and ramshackle way to the capital, Phnom Penh are well and truly over. Waiting and wondering at the little dusty border cafe to see if a bus would, in fact arrive, reminded me of the time back in 1976 when I used to catch the old, ramshackle one baht bus across the small creek to Phuket in south west Thailand. In those days Phuket was not the huge and overly commercialized holiday resort it is today, but consisted of only a few straw huts along the beach. One knew the bus was coming because the conductor used to

sing out ‘Poo keet’, ‘Poo keet’, as loudly as he could. I’d just come there from Goa in India. That was an interesting, but hard place to live, like nearly all of India was in those difficult days under Mrs Gandhi. Unlike Phuket, Goa was filled with despised Western hippies and heroin addicts who barely managed to survive by living on the beaches. They used to steal fish from the nets of the morning fishermen and eat them raw. Being addicted to drugs does this to people. These desperates had even sold their passports. For them Goa was a final destination at the end of a big one way trip to nowhere but the grave. My own personal contribution to Phuket was crapping in the sea, there was no other choice since toilets didn’t exist. Have you never crapped in the sea yourself? I recommend that you try it sometime; it can be a relieving experience.

As with the buses, the river transport on the Cambodian side of the Mekong has improved immensely. Luxury river cruisers and fast jet boats have, for the most part, replaced the small open rowing boats I used to catch from time-totime that sped up an often choppy river from the Vietnamese border to Phnom Penh powered by an over-sized outboard motor balancing on the stern. The boats were always packed with passengers, suitcases and animals of all descriptions. They sped along under a hot sun or in the pouring rain always with only inches of freeboard to spare. And whatever happened to those long, metal, cigarshaped death traps licensed to hold about 30 people, but that usually carried up to 200? They used to speed upriver from Phnom Penh to Siem Riep, the home of the astonishing Angkor Wat temple complex.

On the Road to Phnom Penh

I once had the misfortune to be tricked into taking a trip up to Siem Riep on one of the cigar boats. It was a hellish seven hour journey, which I spent clinging to the outside of the metal tube without food, water or toilets. It was definitely not an experience for the faint-hearted. I somehow managed to survive the journey, but was in a semi deaf state for the next three weeks or so until my hearing gradually returned after suffering from the constant beat of a huge diesel engine minus its muffler. I had previously served as a young officer in the Royal Australian Artillery, but that was nothing compared to the noise I encountered from that diesel engine. Yes, travelling along the Mekong in Cambodia has definitely improved considerably since those early years.

Looking on the more positive side in Cambodia we see that the famous Mekong dolphin is cherished in Cambodia, where it is considered bad karma to kill one. The dolphin is found all the way downstream from the Khone Falls in Laos, and seems to be just holding out against extinction. In the region between Cambodia and Laos the white dolphin is known by the name of ‘Pa Kha’. The dolphin is now protected and we must live in hope that it will continue to survive. Along with the dolphins, the Mekong boasts over 1,500 different species of marine life, second only to the Amazon and Congo Rivers.

It was a hellish seven hour journey, which I spent clinging to the outside of the metal tube without food, water or toilets.

Memories of the Mekong

They say in Vietnam that two women and a duck make a market.

In contrast to the rather languid style one encounters along the Mekong River in Cambodia, the Vietnamese side is usually always jumping with activity. Cambodian and Vietnamese may be close neighbours, but they have very little in common as far as outlook and culture goes. Across the Vietnamese border factories tend to replace the once open fields that still exist on the Cambodian side, and small craft busily ply the River everywhichway, despite the strong current especially in the monsoon season, when the River is in full flow. The River is known as the 'Cuu Long' in Vietnam and Chau Doc is the first substantial Vietnamese town one encounters along its banks after crossing the border from Cambodia. It is home to about 100,000 people. The next major town, and the key to the Mekong Delta, is the busy port of Can Tho, a city of about 300,000 industrious inhabitants.

Can Tho sits on the banks of the Mekong tributary, the Hong Giang, and features many colourful markets that sell food and goods of every description. They say in Vietnam that two women and a duck make a market. Well over the many generations the markets of Can Tho have certainly expanded from that initial small base. Can Tho is also home to the Muslim Cham community, some of the very early and dominant peoples in the that region. The Chams were the original people who inhabited the area. Now the Cham people struggle to maintain their cultural identity in a country changing rapidly under the onslaught of foreign capital investment, especially from Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Long gone are the days Vietnamese suffered, even in the teeming capital of Ho Chi Minh City, without electricity while whole families struggled to live on only five dollars a month.

I can easily recall those dark days and nights in Ho Chi Minh at the end of the 80's decade, literally dark because there was hardly any power available. I used to stroll down the famous street of Dong Khoi, formally known by other names such as Catinat Street of *'The Quiet American'* fame. Along that famous street leading down to the Saigon River I would encounter many out-of-work Vietnamese such as marine scientists and civil engineers, all well-trained in the then Soviet Bloc countries, selling one cigarette at a time. Only those in the siege of Leningrad had it harder. Nowadays one has to take care not to be run over on the narrow and busy Dong Khoi Street by a recklessly driven new and highpowered BMW owned by some government employee's kid whose father has grown rich from the pursuit of corruption, which remains totally rampant, not only in Vietnam, but in all the countries touched by the Mekong.

The Mekong goes boldly, ever moving, ever changing and like the peoples whose lives it touches, ever evolving as time passes; and it will continue to do so during our lifetimes. It snakes through lands undergoing substantial

Selling Fried Spiders by the side of the Mekong

Author Watching the Processing of Squid on the Banks of the Mekong

changes in themselves, some for the good, some for the not so good. The Mekong, under all its regional names is a river of colour, not in itself, because it is uniformly a muddy brown, but because of the regions it crosses and the people it touches with its life-giving presence. Take a trip along its waters and see what it offers. At the very least it will, in most cases, be something very different from anything you would have encountered before. Colour, adventure and excitement: what more could you ask for from a river? The Mekong has it all. I have been lucky enough to have seen and experienced it for myself.

Colour, adventure and excitement: what more could you ask for from a river?

Staying at the Ritz

It was a great decade funded on the back of oil dollars spent freely to fund the Iraq-Iran War

Exotic Vietnam: a place of war and peace: but also of dreams and nightmares. Mystical names from history like Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China blend into one intoxicating concoction the taste of which lasts forever for any that have drunk of such a heady brew. My first sip came in the late 1980's and I still drink today. So much for the Romantic prose, but to understand why I grasped the cup in the first place, it's worth recalling the true flavour of those early days coming after a long period of closure at the end of the 'American War' in April 1975, ironically after most of the US ground forces had already left some 3 years earlier. By calling the 1962-75 conflict the 'American War' the Vietnamese distinguished this particular war from others among their whole range of 20th Century conflicts involving first the Japanese, then successively the French, the Americans, the Cambodians and finally the old enemy, the Chinese. It all gets rather complicated otherwise. After all these wars, and while still bleeding from a thousand physical, psychological, and economic cuts, in December 1987 Vietnam finally and thankfully, again reopened its doors to foreigners like me. And so I arrived on its soil, breathlessly excited and full of open-eyed wonderment one (relatively) cool day in January 1988.

Difficult Days in Saigon

The 80's were decried by many people the world over as a time of greed and waste. I wasn't one of them. I remember the 80's as a decade when people actually did things, took risks, started business ventures, employed people, and spent money. It was a great decade funded on the back of oil dollars spent freely to fund the Iraq-Iran War: it was the best decade there was, even better than the 60's that sizzled from the huge sums spent on funding the American War in Vietnam. The fact that the odd entrepreneur in the 80's went a little overboard and offered opportunities to the greedy to try to get rich quick was merely a passing whim of human excess. And how can this possibly be compared to the huge excesses of the new century that bankrupted so many of the important global economies?

Vietnam was one of the few countries that did not share in the boom times of the 80's. Most Vietnamese industries that had been operating in the southern half of the country prior to its takeover by the Communists in 1975 had collapsed by the mid 80's. North Vietnam was much poorer than the South in natural food resources; its mostly underdeveloped industries, for what they were, had long ago been bankrupted by inefficient Soviet business practices. The North of Vietnam is extremely rich in minerals, but it takes a lot of capital and 'know how' to extract these for industrial use or for export as raw material. Apart from extensive research completed, mostly by East German geologists, nothing much had

been done to exploit these minerals for the benefit of the Vietnamese people. Where was the money to come from in a closed economy?

Like many at the time, I initially believed there were no real industries remaining in the North because they were said to have been 'blown into the Stone Age' by the Arc Light carpet bombing campaigns of the giant B52's during the American War. However, despite all the hype to the contrary, after travelling throughout the North soon after my arrival in Vietnam, I saw this belief of the mass destruction of the North was based mainly on myth caused by the misreporting of the world press, and the hyperbole of various high-ranking US officers and politicians. The sad truth was that the extreme mismanagement and corruption of a socialist economy was responsible for the economic implosion of the North, not the American bombing. After the Liberation in April 1975, the South, which hadn't been bombed, had been taken over by a victorious enemy good at fighting but useless at just about everything else. Not surprisingly, the South soon lost its expertise, capital and markets, so it was not too far behind the North in the national poverty stakes. However, what the South did have in its favour was the bountiful food bowl of the Mekong Delta. This natural food bowl kept alive many a Vietnamese during those difficult days following the end of the American War.

Unfortunately not all of Vietnam had the rich soils of the Mekong Delta. By the late 80's, due to lack of fertilizers, the absence of a well maintained infrastructure, the loss of world markets, and mostly due to the generational disappearance of good old commercial acumen in the face of an inefficient Soviet directed collectivized economic system, Vietnam had turned from a major exporter of rice to an importer. This was an incredible indictment of the inefficiencies bred by an economic system that ignored the need for cash flow and for the high morale that could only be brought about by individual economic reward. Long years of economic hardship had had their impact on the wily Vietnamese farmers and fishermen. Instead of providing their crops to the State factories for little or no payment, they had taken to cutting back on their production and selling to the black market what little crops and fish catch they did produce. The effect of this was to bankrupt the production and processing factories in the major cities, causing widespread unemployment, and a painful deflationary recession throughout the country.

Home Sweet Home Along the Mekong

Staying at the Ritz

Vietnam had turned from a major exporter of rice to an importer.

When I first arrived in Vietnam, life was especially tough for people living in the North; the climate was harsher there, the land less fertile, and the waters lacking good fish. The Red River basin was a mere shadow of the mighty Mekong Delta food bowl when it came to providing bounty to its people. On many occasions when I visited villages even a short distance from Hanoi, I noticed the children often bore the unmistakable signs of malnutrition. Famine was just around the corner. A lesser known fact is that over two million people in North Vietnam starved to death in 1945 due to the Japanese invaders preventing them from sowing their crops. The capacity of the Vietnamese to forgive and forget the many wrong doings against them is amazing so the Japanese are once again welcomed to their country. However, in the late 80's it looked as if history might repeat itself by witnessing yet more mass starvation. Nobody wanted that to happen so the Vietnamese Government was pushed kicking and screaming into adopting changes and economic reform similar to those already sweeping through Hungary in what was still the Soviet Bloc of Eastern Europe. Once the big decision had been made to open the doors once again to foreign investment, no time was wasted in trying to introduce pro investment policies even as these were being fumbled with throughout the rest of the Soviet Bloc. It was going to be a steep uphill climb in a country almost totally devoid of commercial knowledge and experience. For the Vietnamese people there was no choice but to push ahead, and the faster the better.

Cyclo Rider in Saigon

The 'peas and carrots' black market trading with Koreans and Russians in the North, and smuggling activities along the Mekong River in the South, were not enough for them to lift themselves and their families, let alone their country, out of the economic doldrums. With famine knocking on the door, things had become very serious. Thus it was no surprise that with the pending collapse of the Soviet Union looming and the opening of trade in Eastern Europe, Vietnam, along with Hungary, took the lead in opening its borders to foreign investment.

Infrastructure in Vietnam was almost totally absent during the late 80's, most of it having decayed during the long years of war without replacement. At that time useless, corrupt, and lazy Russian and East German socialist bureaucrats and so-called technocrats still infested the country spreading bad example everywhere they went and wrecking nearly every development project they touched. Their attempts at improving the local infrastructure were particularly contemptible. These incompetents were equalled in their ineptitude by the personnel working for the UNDP and Asian Development Bank's so called development projects a short time later. To provide these projects it didn't matter what a private enterprise contractor knew or could do; it was all about how much he could pay the corrupt officials of these organisations so he could win the work. Not surprisingly most of the so-called development aid provided to Vietnam in the late 80's was wasted.

I noticed that just before they left Vietnam, never to return, the Soviet advisors had managed to construct some ugly concrete bridges and dams here and there, but nothing that really helped with generating immediate commercial activity. I once gazed in amazement at a Soviet built dam that had huge pieces of wood protruding haphazardly here and there from the face of its concrete wall. I was glad I wasn't living in a village immediately down river from that particular edifice. I remarked about the protruding timber to a Vietnamese engineer who was accompanying me; however, all he could do was complain that the Soviets 'over engineered' everything and wasted money. I remember musing to myself that from the look of that dam wall it was probably just as well that they did over engineer it.

The Soviets also constructed huge concrete hotels at various places around the country that somewhat resembled Uncle Ho's mausoleum in Hanoi. Uncle Ho never wanted to be exposed forever to public gaze like Lenin. He was a great and humble man who requested that he be buried in his home town of Nghe An in the Central Provinces. Most of the Soviet hotels had few of the comforts one would expect would be features of any hotel, such as electricity and running water. Consequently, the hotels were nearly always empty during the times I was forced to stay in them when travelling up and down the bombed out Highway Number One with my small party of accompanying and ever cheerful Vietnamese.

One such Soviet built mausoleum-like concrete block hotel was situated on the banks of the then rat-infested West Lake in Hanoi. Today this spot is a beautiful tourist resort. Back then, however, it was akin to a work camp in Siberia. I recall sitting on my stark balcony one hot night in July amid the continual buzz of mosquitoes and staring

Most of the Soviet hotels had few of the comforts one would expect would be features of any hotel, such as electricity and running water.

View Along Le Loi Boulevard, District 1, Showing the Famous Rex Hotel (Pink Building) Before its Revamp in 2010

Vietnam was a favourite destination for all sorts of tourist groups from the various Eastern Bloc countries.

out towards the direction of 'Old Hanoi'. I caught sight of a young man from a nearby hovel standing on the shore looking wistfully up at me, the 'mighty foreigner'. I returned to my room, grabbed my half full bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label whiskey, went back out to the balcony and hurled it with all my force in his direction. It landed in the water about thirty metres short of where he stood. Without hesitation he ran into the lake and swam out to retrieve his windfall. I hope he really enjoyed the drink. He looked as though he needed it a lot more than I did.

In the first days of the 'Open Door' policy almost no Westerners visited Vietnam. As one of the few Westerners in Saigon I used to sit alone in the back corner of the dining room in the famous Rex Hotel on Nguyen Hue Street at meal times, often in candlelight due to the absence of electricity. (This was the Rex Hotel, not the Ritz. I'll get to the Ritz much later in the story.) At the Rex I used to curiously watch the large parties of East German tourists. They visited in organised droves, sitting down to eat accompanied by the usual pianist and violinist, because the player of these instruments didn't require electric power of course. No doubt the demure and wisp-like female musicians were paid a mere pittance for their virtuoso performances each and every night. But it kept them alive at that difficult time, and that was the main thing. As some of the East Germans and I really appreciated their talents we tipped them to try to add to their meagre incomes.

Vietnam was a favourite destination for all sorts of tourist groups from the various Eastern Bloc countries. Those from East Germany seemed to be the most numerous and the most brutal in their manner. I guess the latter was because they were just acting like East Germans. Where else could these East German tourists go where an almost valueless East German mark would actually buy anything? Without fail, at dinner time these long-suffering tourists would always be harangued by some 'minder' or other. All I could make out of all the shouting, threatening and carrying on was 'verboten' this or 'verboten' that. What a great way to spend a holiday! I really felt sorry for the poor saps of East German tourists having to sit through it all. I didn't mind the odd Russian or 'Linh So' as he would be known to locals that I came across in Vietnam in those days, as I find the Slavic people to be of a generally friendly nature. However, I can't say I ever took to the East German minder thugs who continually harangued the tourists; not in the slightest. The 'minders' seemed a particularly hard and ruthless lot. No doubt they were specially selected with these characteristics in mind.

For all the world the minders' hazing of the East German tourists reminded me of the dining room hazing I and other first year cadets endured during my first year at the Royal Military College, Duntroon in Australia. I was really hoping I'd seen the last of that sort of bullying behaviour when it all finally ended after the bastardisation scandal broke at the end of 1969. It's amazing how universal the bullying element of human nature can be, especially when officially sanctioned. The Abu Gharaib prison incident in Iraq came as no big surprise to me. It's what some people can do to others if they are improperly supervised and find themselves in a circumstance where they can exercise unrestricted power, especially if that

Author (left) as a Cadet at the Royal Military College, Australia

power is officially condoned. This is why state sponsored terrorism, such as Apartheid and the Zionist expansion into Palestine, is so despicable. All the 'verbotening' from the minders also reminded me of yet another unhappy memory of an encounter I had with the East German authorities a few years before going to Vietnam. It occurred at Check Point Charlie, situated at the dividing Walls between East and West Berlin. (Unknown to many people there were actually two separate Walls in Berlin, an inner one and an outer one that the Westerners saw. In between the two walls was a no man's land of mines and wire.)

My earlier East Berlin adventure took place during one of my leave periods from a peacekeeping force in Egypt, where I was stationed in the early 80's. I decided I had to get away from Egypt and go to some country for a break where everything worked for a change. Not having spent any time in northern Germany I chose to go to Hamburg and then onto Berlin. I wanted to see the Wall, which in those days, was still very much in existence. In fact, as I've said, there were two Walls. The famous large outer wall that you could see and touch while standing in West Berlin, and then there was the relatively unknown, but no less effective inner wall barrier that you encountered on the Eastern side. Between was a gap consisting of a no man's land of about a hundred metres heavily sown with anti personnel mines and trip wire flares. To transit between the walls when travelling between the two Berlins, one had to pass along a narrow walkway (unless you entered in a vehicle). This walkway, located in the American Sector, and the adjacent roadway, were together famously known as 'Check Point Charlie'.

I wanted to see what East Berlin was really like. Prior to crossing over I'd done some research. I'd heard that the exchange rate was one East German mark for one West German mark in East Berlin, whereas if you changed money in the West on the black market before you entered East Berlin you could get a rate of seven to one. The only catch was that it was illegal to take the Western currency or East German marks changed in the West into East Berlin. The bankrupt Communist Government there wanted to rip you off with its ludicrous exchange rate instead, as was the case in the early days in Vietnam. I had changed money on the black market all over the world. Why should this be any different I mistakenly thought; so I went ahead and changed about eighty US dollars into East German marks in West Berlin at the black market rate and went on my way.

After some hesitation and deep thought about how best to carry the money in to East Berlin, I decided to hide it between my belt and trouser top. Then, together with a mixed group of other adventurous Western tourists, I approached the first border booth at the entrance to Check Point Charlie under the watchful eye of the well-armed East German border guards standing aloft and watchful in their

Road Entrance at Checkpoint Charlie Looking Into East Berlin

As I approached I discerned the sinister air of the place and began to have second thoughts; however, I was committed so there was no turning back.

tall, strategically situated sentry towers. As I approached I discerned the sinister air of the place and began to have second thoughts; however, I was committed so there was no turning back. The East Germans are not a friendly people at the best of times and their customs officials were an especially sour lot. There is something sinister about Germans and their manner when in any type of uniform.

When I got to the first booth a severe looking female customs official, who looked like she'd be suitable for guard duty at the thankfully long defunct Belsen Concentration Camp, told my fellow tourists and me to empty out our pockets and declare all the items we were taking into East Berlin. I had my green army combat jacket on and the pockets were full of all sorts of junk, as they always are, including small change in Israeli and Egyptian currencies, the odd Australian coin, and a host of other miscellaneous items that men tend to carry about them when they have copious pockets. The official frowned heavily at the disorderly pile in front of her, but luckily was distracted enough by the array of different coinage not to think of searching me physically for any undeclared items.

I went through the check without further ado. What had me worried, however, was my learning that Check Point Charlie didn't merely consist of the one main checking booth, but a number of others spaced along the laneway, one after the other, as one gradually transited through the hundred metres or so of 'no man's land'.

It was a busy day, however, so I was worrying in vain. Once past the inner wall and away clear into East Berlin I breathed a sigh of relief. It was a disquieting experience.

Lots of Uniforms at Checkpoint Charlie!

Foot Access to Checkpoint Charlie!

For those who have never visited East Berlin before the Wall fell, you really missed an eerie experience. The place stank of all that was bad about Communism. In fact East Berlin was meant to be a Communist show city; ironically it was, because it was nothing but a lie, a surface facade. Walking around the city near to the Wall was akin to walking through the Universal Studio movie sets I inspected many years later in Los Angeles. There were a host of empty looking public buildings surrounding big, open squares and little else. Many of the fancy fronts of buildings had crumbling sides and rears. The internal fixtures of the few shops I saw seemed to be made of paper mache. In fact, a bad experience with the paper mache fittings in one particular department store, if one can term such a place as I saw a department store in the Western sense of the word, nearly helped land me in the Gulag Archipelago.

After wandering the city at night for hours and finding nothing to buy I had entered into a large government run department store (they were all government run) to warm myself from the cold. Up until that time I had searched in vain for something to buy with my illicit East German marks. I had discovered there were few consumer goods to be had. Earlier in the day I had seen a small flower shop introduce some newly cut flowers into its window. Within seconds a long, disciplined line of hopefuls were patiently waiting at its door. The first twenty customers or so bought out all the flowers. The shop then closed up; the other customers still waiting immediately turned and left as if by way of a wellrehearsed routine. I found the experience amazing. The irony now was that I had risked all to smuggle money into this God-forsaken workers' paradise only to find that the cupboard was well and truly bare.

Ominous Sign at Checkpoint Charlie

I experienced a similar thing years later in the then Czechoslovakia when I absent-mindedly strolled into a book shop, much to the consternation of the unnoticed queue of people patiently waiting outside. I discovered you had to be passed an empty shopping basket from someone leaving the store before you could enter. Later, after my turn had come to enter and after going up some stairs I looked down at the various counters in the book shop. All the books were scattered in untidy piles top of the counters. There were no tidy display shelves. None of the government employee assistants cared less. There was no highly coloured and stylish advertising to brighten up the place either since the government was the only retailer allowed to trade. It's amazing how dull and grey things can be without advertising. We often curse it in the West, but try existing without it. I stared at the people around me. It was like they had no souls; they were similar to the creatures from the movie, *'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'*, who had lost their personalities to the plant-like creatures that lived within them turning them into emotionless, walking zombies.

The irony now was that I had risked all to smuggle money into this God-forsaken workers' paradise only to find that the cupboard was well and truly bare.

Staying at the Ritz

Being a person of contrary nature I was delighted to pass my time in a few other Government stores watching dozens of customers eyeing stereos and radios at least twenty years behind the entertainment equipment offered in the West. The new digital alarm watches had just been introduced in the West and I kept setting mine to go off to attract the surprised attention of the gazing East Berliners much to the chagrin of the various superior looking salespeople trying to demonstrate their Stone Age music technology. It was all good fun until I tried to tie up my shoe lace. I lifted up my foot onto a small display stand next to a money changing counter thinking it was constructed of solid wood. To my surprise my foot crashed straight through the paper mache stand, much to the fury of the nearby male sales person whose demonstration I had recently upstaged by my antics with my digital watch alarm.

View of the Berlin Wall from West Berlin

Upon breaking up his pathetic paper mache stand a huge row ensued between the salesperson and me. We locked horns with neither understanding a single word of the other's language. This little fracas was to make life a bit tricky for me later on when trying to leave East Berlin. After venting my spleen, more to relieve boredom and somehow strike a blow against the oppressors of freedom, I fled the government store and wandered ever deeper into this amazing fictional city where real human beings actually dwelled. It was a depressing experience. I passed buildings still damaged from the last War. I had a beer in a strange little pub and watched the downtrodden looking cliental murmur to each other in soft voices that couldn't be overheard by vindictive ears. From the shabby buildings I could see what a grey, grimy and sinister looking place Berlin must have been during the thirties and forties. Nothing much had changed in East Berlin since the War once you got past the empty show buildings on the border. Maybe it was the oppressed.

East German people themselves that lent such a gloomy character to that section of their past capital city. While sipping my beer quietly I tried to imagine what it must have been like to be a prisoner in your own home, because this is exactly what the East Berliners were. They gave current truth to the saying that after a war 'winners are grinners and losers are weepers'.

The Soviets certainly hadn't wasted any time or money lifting the standard of living of the East Berlin citizens. I guess they still carried the deep scars from what the Germans did to them during the 'Great Patriotic War'; these would take a few lifetimes to heal and then some. The father's story is usually passed to the son and often also to the grandson. Once many years later when I was enjoying a visit to the Wiggles Strip Club in Brooklyn, New

York, the Russian manager took a liking to me and invited me to a local Russian restaurant that was that very night hosting the annual celebrations of the Russian victory over the Germans. I left that celebration assured that the Russians still had good memories of what happened during the Great Patriotic War. I also left with a bottle in the form of a Nineteenth Century Russian soldier full of the best vodka. That now empty bottle still sits proudly on my bookshelf to remind me of that excellent night and of my wonderfully hospitable Russian host. I haven't forgotten about the Great Patriotic War or, indeed, the Wiggles Strip Club either.

Eventually as midnight approached in East Berlin I had to consider returning to the bright lights of the West. A little prior to my return, however, I did manage to finally spend about thirty dollars worth of my East German marks by buying a surprisingly well-tailored fawn-coloured trench coat made in Poland, of all places. I must say that the clothes, like the weapons and even some machinery, made in the Eastern Bloc weren't at all bad, it's just that no one there really wanted them due to their desire to live a vicarious existence by laying their hands on whatever the West could offer. Everyone wanted things made in the West. I found the same syndrome in Vietnam years later. People wanted to escape the thought of their economic torment as much as the concrete reality of it. They could buy a perfectly good Czech motor bike for little or nothing in Saigon, but they would rather save up for years to pay a fortune for a knocked around Honda, simply for having the 'prestige' of riding something made in Japan or in the 'West'. It was a major form of escape from their otherwise drab existence. Brand consciousness remains very strong in Vietnam today, as indeed it does in many impoverished countries.

Check Point Charlie closed at midnight and I only had a day visa; so with my purchase completed and securely tucked under my arm, I was in a hurry to get back across the border. It was a long, lonely, dark and daunting approach to the check point from the East Berlin side and I was already feeling apprehensive. This time I was approaching the customs officials all on my own rather than as part of a group of fellow tourists at a busy time of the day. As a precaution, and after some thought, I had hidden the extra unspent marks in a pocket of the coat, which I then rewrapped in his packaging thinking they would be safer there than on my person. I would have done better to have left them in my original hiding place.

It was a long, lonely, dark and daunting approach to the check point from the East Berlin side and I was already feeling apprehensive.

As I was nervously crossing the final street to enter the check point, a police vehicle suddenly appeared out of nowhere and screeched to a stop beside me. Out jumped an aggressive member of the East German Volkspolice; he started screaming at the top of his voice at me in

Early Conflict at Checkpoint Charlie

German, of which I understand only two or three words. At first I was surprised and stunned and couldn't make out what he wanted. Then after a while I discerned he was accusing me of having crossed a road devoid of traffic, late at night, without waiting for the crossing light to go green. No East German in his right mind would have been on that road immediately adjacent to the Wall at that time of night. It was an excuse by the cop for trying to lever some Western currency from my pocket into his. I played the dumb Australian for a while; this had the effect of sending him ballistic. Maybe we'd recently beaten his country at cricket or something similar.

Previously I had attended many an integration course at the School of Military Intelligence and the Land Warfare Centre in Queensland, Australia. I had also endured the heavy bastardisation at Duntroon in my first year as a Fourth Class Cadet. I had therefore learned to take in my stride any sort of pressure induced by shouting and screaming. The old rhyme that 'sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can never hurt you' is true enough. However, things took a direct turn for the worse when the other goon, seeing no money appear, also stepped out of the car. It was 'London to a brick on' as the bookies at the races would so colourfully say that I was in for a brutal beating if I persisted with the same 'dumb Australian tourist' routine. The Volkspolice were infamous for handing out such 'sticks and stones' beatings. The trick in these situations is to know when to quit while you still have a head. So with discretion definitely being better than valour when you are isolated and alone on the wrong side of Check Point Charlie in the middle of a dark night, and secretly guilty of money smuggling, I paid the savages off with ten dollars US each and they were soon happily on their way having 'raped' yet another Western victim in what must have been a well-rehearsed routine.

Author (extreme right) as a Captain Instructor with Joint Force and Civilian Students at the School of Military Intelligence, Land Warfare Centre, Queensland, Australia

Even though I had kept control over the situation, the encounter with the Volkspolice had unnerved me. I was a serving member of the Australian Intelligence Corps. As such in those years I was officially forbidden to travel to a Communist country. In addition, no one had any idea where I was. If I had disappeared to the Gulag Archipelago, or had simply been left lying in some East Berlin gutter by those gangsters masquerading as police, no one would have been the wiser, or cared less. I was also in possession of money illegally smuggled into East

Germany in the first place. With all of this in my mind I approached with some trepidation the first customs check point under the harsh glare of arc lights. It was like being in the movie *'The Spy Who Came in From the Cold'*.

The bored and unhappy customs official I encountered at the first check station, complete with faded blue jacket and gravy stains on his tie, looked pleased to have something to do at last: anything to pass the dragging hours on the night shift. He spoke no English, but gestured for me to empty the copious pockets of my combat jacket, which I dutifully obeyed after placing my carefully wrapped up coat to one side and away from his direct gaze. After examining the articles I laid out before him, the customs official did a terrible thing: he picked up my coat and started slowly unwrapping it before proceeding to go meticulously through each and every nook and cranny of the garment. My heart stood still. I was in an agony of apprehension and I did everything I could to distract him from the task from pretending to see someone else approaching the check station to pointing to the Israeli coins I had scattered onto his counter. He just glanced at me disinterestedly while continuing with his methodical and ponderous search.

I must have stared at the official like a man tied to a chair watching the slowly burning fuse of a stick of dynamite placed under him. Watching the search proceed was akin to having a dentist slowly pull out all your teeth one by one. Eventually the suffering ended when the customs official suddenly extracted the bundle of unspent notes from their hiding place. He gazed at them for a moment as if not really comprehending what he saw and the then dropped them on the counter in front of me. Still devoid of expression the customs official gestured for me to go into a room behind me that turned out to be a small holding cell like you see in a Sheriff's office in B-grade Western movies, complete with bars and a long wooden bunk. The official followed me in and left the coat and, surprisingly, the bundle of notes, in front of me before turning to leave, closing the door behind him with a resounding 'clang'.

'Shit, what happens now?' were my panicky thoughts. I had to get control of myself. 'Siberia here I come' were words that kept flashing like neon lights in my brain. 'Move over Ivan Denisovich and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn' (the latter being once a captain in the artillery like myself, only he was in the Soviet artillery, then the enemy!) All my interrogation training came flooding back to me. Keep calm, keep cool. 'They only know what you tell them'. 'Admit to nothing'. 'Stay friendly and relaxed'. 'Try to get the translator on your side to take off some of the interrogator's pressure'. I placed my hands on the cold bunk and then pressed them on my face to reduce my nervous flush. Above all I had to find out what the bottom line was: what could

In Memory of Those Who Died at the Wall

Watching the search proceed was akin to having a dentist slowly pull out all your teeth one by one.

'Damnation', I thought, 'This is starting to get a little serious'.

they do to me? That had to be the key to any defence strategy. Glancing around I couldn't see the camera from which I was obviously being observed. The money had been left on the table. I thought of eating the evidence, but then they probably had it all on tape anyway, and once again, my commercial blood railed against the thought of destroying good money.

I decided the only way through this predicament was to try to continue to try to play the dumb Australian, a role I was a natural for. I was to be the Barry McKenzie of East Berlin confused by all the 'oh-so-intelligent' East German customs officials. An intelligent customs official? What a sad oxymoron. What did Shakespeare say about our all being players on the world stage? Well, my chance to star was soon to come as within minutes of my having set my strategy, about ten custom officials burst into the small cell all hollering in guttural German at once at the tops of their voices. As most know, the German language is not exactly comprised of soft tones; when you are on the receiving end of torrents of it launched by ugly looking characters in high peaked caps, it can be an intimidating experience.

While all this was occurring in front of me, in the back of my mind I recalled a scene from an old time war movie. A man had just returned bruised and battered from a Gestapo interrogation room. His amazed friend demanded to know how he managed to get released. The exprisoner simply said: 'Well, they only know what you tell them, and I told them nothing.' It was a brilliantly simple defence strategy and all I had to cling to. What could I tell them anyway when they spoke no English and I hardly a word of German? After about ten minutes of their imitating their long dead ancestor, Attila the Hun, it eventually dawned on them that their approach was not going anywhere fast, so one of the officials disappeared and soon reappeared with a border guard armed with an AK47 assault rifle, you know the kind they merrily use to shoot people trying to escape over the Berlin Wall. 'Damnation', I thought, 'This is starting to get a little serious'.

Luckily the guard had been dragged in as an unwilling translator because he spoke excellent English rather than to shoot me. I quickly complimented him on the high

One Who Did Not Cross: Death Be Not Proud Though Some Have Called Thee Mighty and Dreadful

standard of his English and thus immediately got him on side. My interrogation defence ploy worked. The customs officials continued to scream at him in their unproductive way and after unwillingly being on the receiving end of all this invective, he simply turned and spoke politely to me, thus shielding me from a lot of the pressure. I discerned the officials wanted to know where I'd changed my money. H'mm, I was expecting this question, but didn't really have an answer. The only place I saw in East Berlin that I could have changed money legally was a kiosk in the very store where I had had the huge row with the aggressive sales person. If I took them there the sales person would be sure to spot me and then it wouldn't go well from there on, not after how I'd verbally kicked his butt. Of course, he would have denied that I had been anywhere near the exchange counter, let alone have officially and legally changed money there. I had no option but to continue to try to bluff my way through.

I told the guard a story along the lines that I was only an Australian tourist from 'Down Under' not used to all the 'sophisticated ways' of the 'extra smart' East German society etc. It's amazing how people brought up for years on end in a narrow, heavily censored society and constantly fed on State-generated propaganda all their lives, actually believe their own bullshit. Censorship and propaganda invariably have a negative effect on the intelligence and vision of the people they are supposed to protect. South Africans suffered from this malaise under the Apartheid regime. Vietnamese still do. Many black Americans believe naively in the tired 'land of the free and the brave' slogans continually blasted out by the American media, despite having been treated for most of their lives in their own country like their slave ancestors were when they were first 'press ganged' in from Darkest Africa.

Caravelle Hotel After its Huge Extension. The Old Version was the Early Home of the Author in 1988

After a pantomime of shouting and gesticulating, I eventually managed to get to the bottom line of what these customs officials intended to do to punish me. They couldn't prove that I'd illegally changed the money in East Berlin, so it seemed they couldn't do much to me. It didn't ever occur to them that I'd actually smuggled the money in from the West. As far as they were concerned, their system of inward checks was infallible. It comes with the weakness instilled into a brainwashed mind. In the end, I discovered they just wanted to confiscate my coat! Was that all? What absolute

I eventually managed to get to the bottom line of what these customs officials intended to do to punish me.

It's all academic now, but if you ever wanted to screw with 'the system', East Berlin really wasn't the ideal place to do it.

pussies! One picked it up, but I immediately leaned forward and grabbed it back off him with the outraged indignation of a totally innocent man. He gave it up in surprise, unused to anyone challenging his authority in the authoritarian State he called home. He didn't know what the average Australian thought of authority, especially as exercised by petty government officials, and particularly by upstart customs officials of small value to society. Written on his face was the thought: now who else but an innocent man would show such balls in the face of all this pressure? For all their shouting and rabbiting on, these customs officials were candy. They looked sheepish and meekly at each other and stood back while, with chest pushed out and head held self righteously upright, I tucked my coat under my arm, put my money back in my pocket, and marched straight by them, through the other check posts, and directly across the border back into the sanctuary of the West. They didn't notice my cold sweat and I didn't breathe again until I was around the nearest corner well beyond their reach. They really used to shoot people over there in the 'Wall Zone' for exercising their right to freedom, so I was lucky to have made it back unscathed.

It's all academic now, but if you ever wanted to screw with 'the system', East Berlin really wasn't the ideal place to do it. It wasn't too easy at the military college either, though I gave that a good go too. 'You can't beat the system' was the mantra of so many of the brainwashed senior cadets. But I proved you could, both times. It just wasn't a very easy thing to do.

The whole Socialist Bloc population had become dependent on the State for overly generous payouts for little or no work in return, exactly like the Australian public service had become in Australia, with predictable results (the worst being the little Hitlers calling themselves immigration and customs officials). The end result in Vietnam saw professional people like teachers and engineers out on the streets of Saigon selling one cigarette at a time in order to eke out the most meagre of livings, while government officials and diplomats grew fat off corruption achieved by blocking all development projects until they were handsomely paid off. Others in the Mekong Delta turned to either subsistence fishing or smuggling in any effort to survive. This is what an artificially, rather than market-controlled economy can do to even a resource rich country like Vietnam. Vietnam, and Saigon in particular, had degenerated down to become the home of desperate, dangerous and unruly pickpocket gangs that inhabited the central markets around places such as Huynh Thuc Khang Street in District 1. One day I had to physically knock one of these gang members out on nearby Nguyen Hue Street when he attacked me thinking my worthless copy pen bought in Thailand a few days earlier was actually worth something.

When thinking back about the working poor in Saigon during those bleak days, I picture two old waiters at the famous Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon. At that time, the Caravelle and the nearby Rex were the two most famous hotels in Saigon; somehow they had survived the War. The Caravelle had been renamed the 'Independence Hotel', or some other such ridiculous patriotic name, which I don't now fully recall, and was functioning, often without electricity, at a shadow of its former glory. Late in 1988, when some electricity was sometimes available, the Caravelle proudly introduced black and white television into its rooms. The programs mostly featured talking heads from the then USSR and occasionally some so-called cultural clips featuring scantily clad females performing semi-exotic dances passed off as ballet. Oh, yes, and there were the war serials too.

The war serials weren't too bad actually for a rudimentary TV industry. They displayed Vietnamese actors whose eyes were heavily blackened in an attempt to make them look like Americans. Very strange I thought. However, I used to enjoy watching all these TV shows, especially, surprisingly maybe, the white-skinned 'heads' talking in Russian. They were a welcome change from being surrounded by what seemed to me then to be an alien Asian culture consisting of little brown people speaking incomprehensible Vietnamese. Living as a lone Westerner for weeks on end like this with no one to talk to who speaks English can get to one, trust me. Once I travelled down the long, thin, snaking road to the northern port of Hai Phong. This was in the days before they put in the new highway, and the old East German and Czech made trucks were lined up bumper to bumper all the way making snail-like progress. While I was there with no communications at all, with no other English speakers other than my one translator, and amid all the corrupt marine union gangsters, I felt trapped and claustrophobic; it was as if I would never be able to escape and would end up suffocating to death in that absolute hellhole I dubbed the 'arsehole of the universe'.

I recall there used to be two old waiters working in the small upstairs dining room of the old Caravelle. They had been serving there for most of their working lives. They were living legends who had seen the French, Americans, Russians and East Germans all come and go. Now they were serving the newly arriving 'carpet baggers' like me; the 'get rich quick sharpies' from the West replete with their two dollar issued share companies. I sat in the old Caravelle's dining room being served by these two old waiters over many of the days I spent in Vietnam in the late 80's. Once while sitting in the old reception foyer that has since been converted into a coffee lounge after the big new extension was built, I gazed out the window at a crazed old American veteran marching up and down outside wearing a pack with two little American flags sticking out amid the bemused gaze of the Vietnamese minders who used to infest all hotel foyers in those days. I got to thinking about what a different place Saigon would have been twenty years before, and how much it would again change in the twenty years to come. Was I right or was I right? After many years' hard service, both the tired old waiters retired shortly afterwards to be lost in time, other than that I still keep the memory of them alive here. They'd both be long dead by now, so may they rest in peace.

Bizarro Hotels in Bizarro World!

Staying at the Ritz

I also regularly stayed in run-down hotels in Da Nang in the central region, once the site of a huge American airbase, but which since then had relapsed into a sleepy, dirty and decrepit little town. That said, Da Nang had not yet reached the pits of Hue, the ancient capital, which had all been but destroyed in the American War. I recall once at that time visiting Hue keen to experience its so-called Perfume River. I was absolutely appalled at the utter pollution and stink of that once resplendent waterway. Happily things have improved a lot since then, although the puny Perfume River will never shape the nation's destiny as does the mighty Mekong.

Entrance to Annex of the Ritz Hotel in Better Days When Food and Drinks Were Available

One particular hotel I used to stay in at Da Nang, I sarcastically called the 'Ritz' since it was the complete opposite of any visions of splendour conjured by that name. The first time I booked into the Ritz, to my great surprise the room I was allocated to actually contained a telephone. In my surprise and joy at seeing some vestige of civilization I spontaneously rushed over and picked up the receiver ready to make a call only to discover to my bemusement and self ridicule that neither the receiver nor the old phone left over from the French colonial days had any wires attached to them. It was all only for show in this Bizzaro World of the newly opened Vietnam. An experienced traveller like me should have known better: more fool me and I had a rueful laugh at myself over this lapse in commonsense. After this experience I always scoffed scornfully at that American Express advertisement popular a little after that time in the West. It featured a sick Westerner in some God-forsaken hotel room in some equally God-forsaken oriental country, leaning over from his bed and picking up the phone to call the American Express office for assistance. What phone? What line connection? What American Express office in a land where only cash was king? What English speaker at the other end of the line, if anyone even bothered to reply? And you could also forget all about ever being able to call any ambulance, doctor, or hospital, ha ha. In Bizarro World you were all on your own, buster.

For cultural 'connection' I had to make do instead, as I so often did, by turning in my trusty little short-wave radio that had served me so well over the years of travelling around and living in developing countries. I always tuned into

the BBC. Whenever the music played at the start of the World News, emotion flowed and I again remembered that Britain had once had a mighty Empire and that perhaps civilization did still exist in some other remote corner of our lonely planet.

One time while staying at the Ritz I recall having a 'bird bath' one very hot and humid day after a very tiring series of negotiations with the local People's Committee of some remote district to the west of Da Nang. A 'bird bath' consisted of going to the tiny closet that served as a bathroom and turning on the hose in the corner to thoroughly wet oneself down. One then turned off the hose, completely soaped oneself from head to foot and then turned on the hose again to rinse off. Well, on this particular occasion after I had completely soaped myself I went to turn the hose on again, but no water came out. Some petty official in Da Nang had decided the hotel had used up its quota of electricity for the day and had simply turned off the electricity supply meaning no power for the pump and thus no water to my room. I was furious. After about two weeks of living in very hot, humid and generally difficult conditions the slightest hiccup was enough to send me as ballistic as the cop in East Berlin. I grabbed a towel that consisted of a piece of worn out rag about a metre long by half a metre wide, and tore down two flights of stairs four at a time with blood on my mind. (I actually came across an even worse towel, one that had a great hole in the middle of it in Germany of all places. It happens if you try travelling in Europe on prepaid vouchers. The Hotel manager ate that towel for breakfast.)

The poor hotel porter in the lobby was the first man to encounter this soap sud covered raving lunatic of a Westerner wearing only a lap lap leaping down the stairs and he must have thought his life was about to end. However, one look at his terrified face melted my heart and told me I was on a hopeless cause. I let my rage subside as quickly as it had arisen, just shrugged my soap-covered shoulders at the porter to his great relief and wearily trudged back up the stairs to lie in sweaty, sticky misery for hours until someone decided to turn the power back on. Such was life at the Ritz in Vietnam in those days.

In yet another hotel I stayed in near the southern edge of the Mekong Delta, the management policy was that only half of the hotel could have water every two days. This meant that if you were unlucky enough to stay on the wrong side of the hotel you couldn't even flush your toilet

'Hotel Street' in Da Nang

Looking back, I wonder how I survived those days in the Delta and in other parts of the country.

for want of water in your cistern for a whole day and night (if you were ever fortunate enough to have such a luxury as a sit down toilet). So when travelling in the Mekong Delta region I soon learned it was important to travel with a colleague whenever possible and insure he always stayed in the opposite side of the hotel. However even this safeguard proved to be of no protection against the huge loudspeakers invariably located immediately outside one's window. These blasted out the standard local Party propaganda at 6am every morning to the workers sleepily meandering to tend their rice crops, or to those heading to the local market. Waking up to this racket was all followed by a breakfast of semi-cooked eggs and good Russian vodka, which in those days could be bought for about twenty cents a bottle.

Looking back, I wonder how I survived those days in the Delta and in other parts of the country. But I did, just as I survived my time at four long years at the military college and my excursion into East Berlin; and I now record all for posterity, even though these days the Ritz is no more. Who says humanity is not all-enduring?

Typical Market Scene Adjacent to Ritz Hotel (in Better Days when Goods Became More Available)

Changing Money in Saigon

Everyone who lived and worked in Saigon at that time of the late Eighties, including the police, who were in his pocket, knew the famous Chinese shoe merchant by the name of Hong Lu Long. Long (the first name is always given last in Vietnam; for a Westerner, everything associated with the Vietnamese culture seems to be back-to-front), had a small 'front' shop filled with low quality, poorly made shoes located near the corner of Pasteur and Le Thanh Ton Street in District 1, Saigon. Like so many streets in Vietnamese cities, Le Thanh Ton Street was named after a famous Vietnamese character, in this case an Emperor of bygone days. Of course the shoe shop was nothing but a 'front'. In truth Long controlled the black market and foreign exchange business in Saigon. He smuggled most of his goods down the Mekong to avoid customs duties. This remains a common enough practice today, but in those days of almost zero government tax revenue, a few years before Vietnam opened its borders to foreigners, it was a very risky business indeed. There were a lot of 'desperates' in Vietnam fighting to survive, and even more in Cambodia, so people had to take risks and they did.

A brilliant man, Long spoke numerous Asian and Western languages and sold anything he smuggled into Saigon from a big warehouse located directly behind the facade of his shop front. Long's goods ranged from top quality French champagne, through to the best soft Russian leather and, of course, heroin. In those days opium dens still existed in the Chinese district of Cho Lon ('Big Market'). I know because I visited some. I used to gad around the place a bit in those days, so not too much escaped my attention, particularly since I had the trusty services of a very astute Chinese friend known as the 'Black Lady', because she usually dressed all in black and had a somewhat sinister air about her. She was the master manipulator of the local police, a handy trait to have in Vietnam in those days and even now. Since the 'cleanout' in 1989, resulting in so many boat people leaving Vietnam, Cho Lon is now more innocuously known as 'District 5'.

Long also sold slaves. He once told me about his slave trade. Long never boasted, or wasted time, when it came to business, so I have no doubt that he told me the truth.

Original Location of Long's Shoe Shop on Le Thanh Ton Street. Now the Site of the Norfolk Hotel

Changing Money in Saigon

The crook had declared that it was too dangerous for him to hold so much money on his person.

The slaves were mostly relatives of those who owed him money and couldn't pay in cash. No one owed Long money and didn't pay in one way or another: he was definitely a 'I'll have my pound of flesh' sort of a guy. In these modern days where shirkers and fraudsters abound and practise their black arts with impunity, especially in IndoChina, I somehow admired Long for his code of accountability and retribution for those who didn't pay their debts on time. No one lived beyond their means at Long's expense.

The so-called 'impoverished' shoe merchant was always a 'fair dealer'. It was a bizarre environment in the late 80's in Vietnam so I guess one could describe someone as being 'fair' even if he traded in the likes of slaves and black market goods, provided he had some sort of a code. Long was a bit like Robin Hood if one likes to exercise the imagination enough to draw a comparison. But I don't think Long gave to the poor. He was Chinese after all so one had to allow for this. Only a foolish man would have ever have tried to cross Long in his own territory. One thing was certain though, because he controlled the illegal money exchange business in Saigon, he always gave the best black market exchange rate in the City.

On one occasion I recall leaving my relatively comfortable hotel in District 1, for the standards of those days at least, with my friend and client, whom I affectionately called 'Fatman', maybe because I'm an exponent of 'tough love'. I had just returned to Saigon from an arduous trip from the Mekong Delta. All Delta trips were tough in those days due to the appalling establishments that passed as hotels. All were government owned, which speaks volumes for the service, or rather total lack of it, one could expect. Most hotels were usually devoid of power and water. Fatman was an investor in the fledgling aquaculture industry in Vietnam. Like so many naive Westerners in those early days he subsequently managed to lose nearly all of his money in his venture, a sum of about ten million dollars at least; however, that's a whole other story, so I won't go into details here, other than to reflect that Fatman probably holds the dubious honour of being the first of many of the new wave of naive foreigners to come to Vietnam and lose all their money when investing in Vietnamese ventures. At that time Fatman had recently told me about how the day before his brother-in-law, who was also in Vietnam and also contracted by him as a fisheries technician, had been ripped off by a wily local unofficial money changer.

It seems the money changer had made the astonishing statement to the brother-in-law, who could never lay claim to the likes of Einstein by way of intellectual capacity, that he could give a better Vietnamese dong – US dollar exchange rate than the eminent Long. Fatman then described how the 'fly-by-night' money changer had sat with his gullible brother-in-law in a nearby restaurant. The crook had declared that it was too dangerous for him to hold so much money on his person (in those days the Vietnamese dong equivalent of a hundred US dollars was almost a king's ransom). He then pulled out an empty white envelope. He told Fatman's brother-in-law to put his hundred dollars in the envelope and hold it while he went away to get the Vietnamese dong currency. The money changer then departed, never to return.

Eventually, after sitting alone for about twenty minutes feeling increasingly frustrated, Fatman's brother-in-law grew weary of waiting and opened the envelope to retrieve his hundred dollars. And, lo and behold, what did he discover: only that the Vietnamese had switched envelopes while at the table and left him holding one containing a piece of green paper. Not only did he lose his hundred dollars, he felt like the proverbial horse's arse. It was the sort of double whammy to the ego that all defrauded people experience, even to the extent of

never getting around to reporting the crime. Yes, I guess being defrauded is a little like being raped in this respect. Anyway, the brother-in-law survived his ordeal. He's still in Vietnam, and maybe the second longest term man here after me, since he came a few weeks after my arrival. But time doesn't always bring change. He's still as dumb as he ever was; it somehow suits him and he's happy enough in his innate stupidity, as some people are, thank the Lord.

Now you'd think that two sell-acclaimed smart, educated, and commercially sophisticated Westerners like Fatman and me, having been forearmed with the above information, would have been just too quick for a another Vietnamese petty crook to fool. Unfortunately, as it soon transpired, this did not prove to be the situation. It was a case of our employing the wrong 'American War' mentality all over again: ie, that 'one Westerner is always worth ten Zipperhead' Viet Cong (so-called after the famous American cigarette lighter known as a 'Zippo' during the War).

Dog Food Restaurant in Saigon

It follows that as Fatman and I left the old Caravelle Hotel, well prior to the days of its present refurbished glory, a little after the brother-in-law incident, we were approached by another shady-looking money changer. He informed us of the usual incredible story that he could exchange money at a better rate than Long. We should have just laughed and walked on. In fact, being more experienced in Vietnam and its ways than my portly friend, I did indeed initially scoff at the suggestion that we should fall for such a fantastic line. Unfortunately, my friend's middle name was 'greed' as advertised by his ample waistline, and my middle name was 'ego', as many in those days would no doubt attest. When it came to making foolish decisions about money, 'greed and ego' was an explosive mix.

Fatman's greed argued that we should risk changing the money because the rate was supposedly much better than Long's. At first I objected, but then my ego silently mused, well okay, the money changer was only a skinny little Vietnamese. If he tried any funny business I could easily run him down and squash him like a flea, being young, robust, fit and bursting with testosterone in those days (ah, those bygone days...). Thus we were both drawn into the Vietnamese swindler's 'killing ground' by our own human frailties.

We sat down at an oblong café table on the corner of Le Loi and Dong Khoi streets directly opposite what was eventually to become a revamped Continental Hotel of *'The Quiet American'* fame, but which at that time was nothing more

Local Meat Market

Never underestimate the enemy on his own turf in an operation of his own choosing, especially when he's desperate.

than a crumbling ruin replete with its memories of all the garrulous and hard-drinking journalists who had resided there during the War years. I made sure I sat at the end of the table in case the Vietnamese money changer decided to do 'a runner'. Sadly this landmark cafe where we met has since been demolished to make more room for yet more of the new and brasher Saigon. For years every time I passed that cafe I used to think of that tiny episode in my life. Now this memory begins to fade with time.

It turned out the money changer also had a partner. This shifty-eyed guy kept pacing up and down anxiously a few metres away from our table. He was supposedly keeping a watch out for the police. In fact, he was really acting as the classic distraction to his naive victims, namely us. The ruse worked perfectly, as such distractions are designed to do. I once lost my original Mont Blanc pen in a similar ruse years later on a street corner not too far from that cafe. But this loss was not nearly as painful as when my Vietnamese lady friend and property developer, the 'All seeing, All knowing, and All powerful' Mdm Huan, had her handbag snatched as she alighted from a taxi. The guy on a bike had followed her after he'd been tipped off by a phone call from someone at the bank where she had withdrawn the money. She lost USD20,000 in that snatch and grab; it was a king's ransom at the time in Vietnam. Don't think because you are powerful, experienced and within your own environment that you are invulnerable to anything unfortunate that may come your way.

With his shifty-looking friend well deployed and hard at work with his distraction act, the money changer brought out a big bundle of notes that he dropped on the table. He then snatched the hundred US dollar note from Fatman's hand and was off in a trice. In about two seconds my friend realised that the bundle so hastily dropped consisted only of smaller denomination dong notes wrapped in a larger one, a sum equivalent to a total of about five US dollars all up. No sooner had the squeal left his mouth than I shot off after the swindler like the proverbial bullet. But he was long gone. I was absolutely furious that this little peasant and his also long gone mate had thrashed us both. As any person duped by fraud would know, it's the subsequent self-beatings for being such a fool that really hurt even more than the original duping.

I felt like General Westmoreland must have when being posted home to the United States for having failed to win the American War against what many Westerners held to be similar skinny, under-sized midgets, whom everyone thought would be a pushover. Never underestimate the enemy on his own turf in an operation of his own choosing, especially when he's desperate. The Americans again learned this lesson in Somalia in their 'Blackhawk Down' operation against the 'Skinny's'. This is the message I pass to you. With head hanging down I slowly returned to my friend who was still sitting there like a stunned mullet. We left the scene of the crime with our tails between our legs, the greed and ego having been well and truly drained out of us. As I say, it wasn't losing the hundred dollars. It was the realisation of our stupidity, together with fact that we'd been done by veritable peasants that hurt so much.

But it wasn't all done and dusted just yet. Not by a long shot. Never say die. Being a hot head, my immediate thought was of revenge and that my powerful and influential friend, Long, was the right man to help me achieve it. I therefore left Fatman to console himself at the hotel by overdosing on Heineken (the only decent beer available in the late 1980's in Saigon) and then high-tailed it across town to Long's shoe shop.

By now half of Saigon would have heard how these big-time Western capitalists (as we were commonly called

around town in those early days) had had their butts soundly kicked by a local petty hood. I had to change that point of view in a hurry, or everyone would try to muscle in on the action and we'd have a very hard time surviving for long in the 'gangsterland' that Saigon had devolved into during those dark days of Vietnam's immediate post-War history. The Russian Mafia was already well entrenched in the nearby Port City of Vung Tau. But until the massive cleanout in 1989, Saigon was still under the control of the Chinese from adjoining Cho Lon. One could hardly believe it now, but in those days, Saigon was truly one of the most dangerous cities in the world, because its people had become desperate to survive and desperate people do desperate things. Cho Lon was the control centre for the Mekong smugglers, who were mostly Chinese. Wealth accumulated from this activity had made them all powerful.

Without mincing words I told Long my sorry tale. He just shook his head enigmatically, probably reflecting on the stupidity of the hairy ones and thinking that we got what we deserved for trying to by pass him; who knows? It was impossible to tell. Long was one of the very few people who spoke English in Saigon in those days, but he seldom said much. There were plenty of French speakers and a few Russian, but business English was still far from being in vogue. Smiling, as always, he asked what I would like to do about the situation. It's funny how many Asians can talk while keeping a fixed smile on their face, even if they are threatening to kill you, or you them. The latter happened once when I was about to make a guy living in the hill resort city of Da Lat 'do the chicken' in a bad way for causing me to fall off my bike at high speed . I was not amused after landing with my full weight on the tip of my elbow. It still hurts when I touch it after all these years.

Long always had a charming way about him: it must have been because of his fixed smile. It was better not to ponder what may be hidden behind that smile. To his question I replied that I wanted him to help me find the petty swindler so I could get my money back and settle matters with him. Without asking for further details Long just nodded and asked me to jump on the back of his 100cc motor bike and off we went to one of his police contacts. Long, of course, in keeping with his position, rode a new Honda, which was the envy of a city whose population rode either three or four to a bicycle or, at best, old and smoke-belching Czech, or Russian-made motorbikes powered by what seemed to be rubber band motors.

The police station, in common with most buildings in Saigon at that time, was a rather ramshackle affair that boasted old paint peeling from its walls, an ancient ceiling fan gathering cobwebs that probably hadn't worked since the days of the old regime, and a faded black and white picture of a benevolent looking Uncle Ho Chi Minh hanging askew next to the entrance. We were welcomed by a policeman who seemed to know Long well. Well, no big surprise there. He would have been on the payroll. An unfathomable conversation between the two ensued. When living in Vietnam one gets used to enduring these conversations that go on forever without seeming to reach any conclusion. For instance, as a manager you can request your translator to ask a worker in a factory why he isn't wearing his hard hat. You'd think this and the reply would take only a minute or so. This is never the case. Ask any experienced expat living in IndoChina. Such a verbal intercourse can endure without end. Anyway, finally the policeman miraculously produced a small black and white picture of the very man I pursued. The old cliche that all Chinese look alike also holds true for Vietnamese. Just try picking a Vietnamese out in a shopping crowd of other Vietnamese. The men are all universally short, skinny, ugly, brown, have black hair, and walk about in sandals with their shirts hanging out. However, there was just no mistaking the visage of this sly, fox-faced, mean-son-of-a-bitch. It was definitely my man. What a stroke of luck!

When living in Vietnam one gets used to enduring these conversations that go on forever without seeming to reach any conclusion.

Changing Money in Saigon

To make someone 'do the chicken' in a bad way by breaking his legs with a hammer in cold blood simply for revenge for stealing a hundred dollars was another matter entirely.

The cop told Long the man was a small-time gangster well known to the police. He liked to prey off the newly arriving 'out-of-town' Vietnamese, or the few Westerners staying in one of the few hotels that catered to foreigners, like me (in those early days it was a choice of only the Rex and the Caravelle – a case of jump or burn). A year later I brought the 'Floating Hotel' to Saigon, which quickly became the scene of the limited social life in the city, but that was like in another era, such was the pace of the development in Vietnam in those days. The cop then asked Long what I wanted to do about the thief. Now I was in full testosterone mode and couldn't back down. I offered the cop a hundred US dollars to bring the man to me so I could confront him in person and maybe make him 'do the chicken' in a bad way. Long asked me to explain what this meant. His English was not quite up with all my Australian colloquialisms. Full of bravado I said this meant I wanted to break his legs with a hammer. Long looked at me hard for a short moment before translating the request. I think I had surprised even him. The cop just gave me a quick glance and then muttered something to Long, who simply turned to me and rather casually said 'Okay'.

Vietnamese Police Still Have Wartime Powers. They Often Terrify the Local People. Many Often Buy Their Positions to Make Money

Damnation! I didn't expect that to happen. I thought the cop would say 'no' and then I could have at least created the impression of being tough and ruthless without having to actually do anything physical. Okay, so I'd once finished off a druggie in an abandoned house in faraway Kathmandu, Nepal, and maybe his mate too, but that was in self defence in the heat of the moment. To make someone 'do the chicken' in a bad way by breaking his legs with a hammer in cold blood simply for revenge for stealing a hundred dollars was another matter entirely. There was no way I had the heart to do that over a mere hundred US dollar rip-off. After all, I rationalised, the poor man was just trying to make a living under very difficult circumstances in the best way he knew how. And I was just trying to preserve my reputation of being a supposedly tough foreigner who was not to be trifled with. This situation promised to get out of hand.

I think Long sensed my dilemma. He said to me he'd tell the cop to keep an eye on the man while we took care of some other pressing business. We could always come back later when we had the time. I could then save face with the cop. I had just learned the lesson that in life you should not pull a gun out unless you were prepared to fire it. This lesson was well remembered during my latter visit to Vietnam thirteen or so years later, when on a couple of occasions some big-talking Chinese friends offered to 'whack' our mutual enemies. Maybe they really would have done so, but that was never my way, so I didn't even

pretend to go along with their suggestions. I'd lost enough 'face' the first time I tried to bluff about that. Over the years I've found that despite what the movies may have you believe, it's really quite hard to have someone killed for money, particularly if you yourself don't want ever to be traced.

Canny old Long was one smart man; I guess it's why he was king of the Mekong smugglers. He didn't control half of Saigon because he was a just a pretty face which, incidentally, he most certainly wasn't. But then, again, he didn't have to be. He was rich and powerful. What more could a man want? Women usually love you more for what's in your pockets than for what's in your pants, or for how pretty you are. The whole world knows this. It's a 'girl thing'.

We never did return to see that cop, nor did I ever again encounter that villain. Maybe Long had him 'whacked' secretly for what he would have considered a favour to me because of the man's temerity in upsetting his good Western friend. I never asked and never wanted to know. From then on Long and I became close friends, or at least as close as a foreigner could be to an inscrutable Chinese black marketeer and Mekong smuggler. I often visited Long's shop for enjoyable drinking and chatting sessions whenever I returned to Saigon from my many visits to the Mekong Delta and other more remote regions. Once I spent a Chinese New Year's Eve with him drinking warm French champagne along with a genuine Frenchman, whom Long had somehow managed to find especially for the occasion. I remember spending most of the evening assuring the drunken Frenchmen that Australians were not pro-British just because we insisted on having the Union Jack as part of our national flag.

Many years later when I had well and truly finished my early business in Vietnam and was back in Perth, Australia, a friend passing through Saigon said old Long had suffered a bad stroke and had become a virtual vegetable. Then I heard that he had died and I was pleased for that, because I couldn't imagine Long without his sharp faculties. Hey, we all only have one life and no matter how smart and tough we are, the end will come for even the best of us. Be generous when you can to those around you even if they don't deserve it (and mostly they don't).

After some thirteen years away from Vietnam I then again retuned to Saigon to seek my fortune having lost all in Perth after a very painful divorce. I was undertaking what was to be the third migration in my life. One of the first things I did after settling into my cheap hotel room in Pham Ngu Lao, the renowned back-packers' district, was to go and find Long's shoe shop. It was still there after all those difficult years, with its blue sign with red writing now worn and faded, almost lost amid the many rows of newly emerging busy consumer shops all aglow with garish coloured neon lights that never existed at the time Long and I used to sit drinking our flat French champagne on hot, humid Saigon nights. To my everlasting disappointment I found that the magical little shop, I came to know as my 'Aladdin's' Cave' on Le Thanh Ton Street, once a front for hordes of illicit goods smuggled so artfully from Thailand, through a dangerous Cambodia and up the Mekong River into Saigon, was now being run as a genuine shoe shop by Long's effete son. This unimpressive and obese creature was a sad reflection of the once mighty and dynamic Chinese black market trader and Mekong River smuggler that I once knew. Some people say that it's all in the genes. I say they're wrong. It's in the guts.

Be generous when you can to those around you even if they don't deserve it (and mostly they don't).

Our Hero

It's a place where they lock up dogs in a yard and slowly beat them to death to get their adrenalin flowing because they say it make them taste better.

A Korean friend once said: 'Trying to find a decent job in IndoChina was like trying to catch fish on the mountain top'. He was right, and Vietnam was no exception. So after 11 months of looking for work in Saigon without success since my last contract, I decided to start to earn a living by teaching English as a second language. It wasn't so much a case of needing the money, but of ending the boredom that was inexorably turning my brain to mush.

My week had devolved down to a monotonous routine of 1.Monday: Washing Day. 2. Tuesday: Drying Day. 3. Wednesday: Shopping Day. 4. Thursday: Screw the Maid Day. 5. Friday: Get Extremely Pissed Day. 6. Saturday: Extremely Boring Day, and finally, 7. Sunday: Big Lunch with the Boys at the Caravelle Hotel Day. I just had to do something more constructive if I was to keep my sanity. Therefore I decided to get part-time work at the American English School located way out in the Tan Binh District of Ho Chi Minh City that was past Cho Lon, or what was once 'China Town', prior to the mass exodus of most of the Chinese Vietnamese in 1989. I think the last white man to travel out to the remote outer reaches of Tan Binh District was hanged because they thought he looked too much like 'Casper the Ghost'.

Author on his School Run

My classes started at 8am, so I left home at 7.15am, walked down the 6 flights of stairs from my small, but ritzy (by old Vietnamese standards only) apartment on Dong Khoi Street, the best out of the many worn out 'tourist' streets in Saigon's District 1. It was the same street that was inhabited by the hero made famous in *'The Quiet American'*. En route to the 5 Star Sheraton Hotel, where I parked my 'chopper' for the princely sum of 200,000vnd a month (USD10), I slipped past the new building site next door to my unit where they were beginning the 58 storey 'Times Square' commercial complex. 'There goes my peace for the next 2 years if I can bear to stay on', I mused. There was no quiet in a city packed with 7 million people that was undergoing major redevelopment. Old, decrepit structures were continually being demolished to be replaced by high rise monoliths. This particular construction, and the din that would accompany it, would, no doubt, soon make my life unbearable. I was right. Much later when the building was finally finished I learned that it had bankrupted a bank and the initial developer. Well, there is justice in this world after all.

On I hurried, past the tourist shops, complete with their pretty girls in their traditional feminine and flowing ao dais and past the man selling yesterday's papers. The guy with one eye and one arm held out his cup as usual. He just couldn't get the message that I'm not a tourist *(Toi khong phai la khach du lich!)*, although I knocked him back every day. A few metres on through the throng of shoeshine boys I glimpsed the woman whose face is covered in napalm scars. I survived her onslaught and then muttered a passing 'Hello, are you well' in Vietnamese to the lady who sold me el cheapo 'King George' cigars from time-to-time, before crossing the road to avoid the coconut boy who was always a pain in the butt with his cheeky persistence. He disappeared later never to be seen again. Strange, but nothing too unusual for Bizarro World. It's a place where they lock up dogs in a yard and slowly beat them to death to get their adrenalin flowing because they say it make them taste better. The street smart Big Geoff used to say: 'Chris in Vietnam have no expectations and you'll never suffer any disappointments'. Big Geoff was always so clever about such things. In fact, he was altogether too shrewd for his own good.

After 5 minutes of brisk walking through the humid air I reached my motor bike, strapped on my black military style helmet *('Gee Chris you look just like a Jerry')* and roared down the ramp into the street, narrowly missing the 5 people squashed onto the one 100cc Honda travelling the wrong way against the flow of traffic. At that time I was one of about 10 people out of the thousands in the city who bothered to wear a helmet. More fool them I often thought to myself, rather redundantly, as it turned out. Much later a law came out making the wearing of helmets compulsory. Instantly everyone was wearing a helmet. It used to amaze me how many different designs helmets could come in. Hundreds of thousands of riders, and each with a helmet of a different design, shape and colour. Of course, most of the helmets were totally useless, being mere cheap plastic shells presenting a mere impersonation of a helmet. To the Vietnamese helmets were a necessary evil to wear in the hot and humid weather because the much feared police said so, not something that could one day save their lives. I called this 'fuzzy logic'. Fuzzy logic ruled everything and everywhere in the Bizarro World of Vietnam.

I headed east via Tran Hung Dao Street weaving through the throngs of motor bikes and the ever-increasing number of 4 wheel drive monstrosities that began to clog the narrow city streets. Why would you need a 4 wheel drive in Saigon I wondered with idle interest, while drifting along through a red light along with everyone else on Lai Loi Boulevard. I was like a minnow mingling with the rest of a school of noisy, mobile humanity around me. I changed gear a few times and throttled up while rapidly proceeding, amid the crowd of roaring bikes, onto the next intersection. The next light was green, but we all knew this meant little to anyone still coming from the other direction. Through the intersection I whizzed. A woman in faded pink pyjamas and a conical hat blithely rode her old bicycle at right angles through our almost continuous stream, oblivious of the danger and miraculously surviving the experience. *'Ah she's done this before'*, I thought. She's from some deep, dark region of the Mekong Delta no doubt and has probably never seen a red light in her life, let alone been made aware that it means that she has to stop.

A 'weaver' in an imitation brand el cheapo bright orange golf shirt shot by easily, narrowly missing the woman on the bicycle. Weavers are young Vietnamese men who drive at twice the pace of the normal traffic, using the sway of their bodies to steer their bikes. There is no possibility of their ever being able to stop safely and in time at the speed they travel, so they have perfected the high speed combined body and bike sway down to a fine art. They

It's a place where they lock up dogs in a yard and slowly beat them to death to get their adrenalin flowing because they say it make them taste better.

When Chinese bikes first entered the Vietnamese market they were criticised for being cheap quality.

all ride in a straight-armed fashion, though I have still never worked out why. Maybe one of them once saw a formula one racing driver doing the same and thought it looked cool to do the same. Another of Vietnam's many mysteries. Except at night, when they are often drunk and burst through red lights mowing innocents down at random, weavers are great riders and seldom cause accidents.

Author: At Rest 'Somewhere' in Saigon After Nearly Being Killed from Behind by An Insane Viet Cong War Veteran Just Because He Lost His Bike Parking Ticket

I accelerated up rapidly, joining the leading group of young dare devils tearing ahead of the main crowd. *'Hey, I was young once, too, remember?'* I leaned back in my seat, enjoying the fresh breeze and changed gear again. The next intersection was ahead and we caught the stragglers of the last main batch at the lights. Suddenly a skinny cyclo driver appeared cutting through the traffic in the opposite direction to the flow, a common feat among cyclo drivers. He peddled slowly, and so he should with his load of three people. Just as often he may have been carrying a cargo such as rusty metal rods over five metres long without any red cloth at the ends. If you were unlucky enough to get speared and lived to tell the tale, pray you've had a tetanus injection. If you die, then you have no worries: it was your karma. Earlier on I'd seen a lone Sir Lancelot steering his cyclo with his right hand while caring three shiny ten metre aluminium poles over his left shoulder. No problems to a trained jouster and trainee Knight of the Round Table.

I'm through the intersection without a problem and on my way. Next to me sped a young guy on a cheap Chinese made 125cc. When Chinese bikes first entered the Vietnamese market they were criticised for being cheap quality. Now they command about 80% of the market sales. The young guy was surrounded by old, discoloured plastic containers full of fuel, but still had that superb Vietnamese presence to give me a cheerful grin: he was a veritable smiling mobile bomb! Maybe he'll be picked up one day by an Al Qaeda talent scout. *'Let's go'*, I thought to myself and accelerated madly (I'll always be too young to die in a puff of smoke), just managing to swerve to miss the old lady standing still in the middle of the street holding her hand up in the air as if to magically ensure she is not whacked by some passing rider like myself. I don't know how, but the signal must work as she has managed to reach at least sixty years of age. Most local pedestrians don't even bother with any signals, nor do they glance to the left or right. They just walk straight into the busiest traffic and continue their fateful journey leaving their ultimate destiny to the gods.

Changing down two gears, I encountered a traffic circle that was the pivot point for the intersection of at least eight roads. Hundreds of bikes and cars poured into the melee,

going around the circle every which way. It was a game of bluff. Hundreds of riders in a huge cluster of bikes gave way to the big Western dude on the chopper – all except the demure high school girl riding her bicycle while sitting bolt upright in the way that all young Vietnamese women do, all grace and beauty in her spotless traditional white ao dai school uniform. I barely have time to marvel about how the young girls managed to keep their ao dais so spotless in grimy Saigon before I was swept on, almost against my will, around the circle by the tidal wave of traffic behind me. Without looking either left or right, onward peddled Ms Purity across my front; like the pedestrians, she also no doubt relied entirely on her ancestors for protection.

I signalled to turn out of the circle and smiled to myself because I remembered I am perhaps the only fool in Saigon to employ signals. Giving signals while riding was a sort of secret, malicious joke I had with myself. Taking care to avoid the beaten up bus to my right, I tried to focus on the road ahead, ignoring the conductor who hung out the open door encouraging riders to move or die. Buses are good to use as 'crash barriers' when trying to cross at an intersection against waves of on-coming bikes – but you had to guard against being 'blindsided' by some fool who could leap through the opposite red light and fly around the back or front of the bus thinking that he was some sort of 'ghost rider in the sky'. (Only the male of the species did such suicidal things.)

The bus bore the scars of many a crash and perhaps a 'crush' or two and I could almost imagine I could still see the blood of the last three or four unfortunate riders who were too slow to take evasive action or heed the screamed warnings of the frantic conductor. As if by a portent, I then passed a scene of carnage where six or seven riders had bitten the dust in one of the many communal pile ups always seen when travelling around Saigon, where at least half of the deaths can be found out of the 12,000 riders killed on the roads annually throughout Vietnam. Never believe the government statistics about road fatalities in Vietnam. The government controls the press and it's not in its interest of promoting foreign business investment, or the tourist industry, to advertise such a high death rate. A week earlier I had seen where a huge truck had decided to take a short cut at top speed by going the opposite way around a traffic circle on Dien Bien Phu Street. The truck had hit a car head on and both had exploded into a fireball. The fireball caught a mini bus full of people trapped next door and gutted it also, killing all aboard. The still smouldering remains could be seen at the site a day later. Two days after the event, I read in one of the local newspapers that an accident had, indeed, occurred at that spot but, according to the reporter, only some minor injuries had been sustained.

I glanced to my left as I sped past the communal pile of wrecked bikes. Amid the shattered bikes I saw at least three people lying still on the road. *'Hope they make it'* I thought to myself, while pressing on with increasing speed. I half imagined I might have seen the bright orange golf shirt of the weaver who had earlier shot past me among the casualties, but he wasn't there. He must have been sober. When Weavers are sober they are just too good at what they do to get involved in a deadly pileup. Usually such incidents involved inexperienced worker motorbike riders newly brought in from the Mekong Delta region since they would accept below average wages. Of course, 'This is Vietnam', as the expats always said, so it goes without saying that such riders never had licenses, insurance or medical cover.

In Saigon, as in most developing countries, the front motorbike rider makes all the rules. Going fast has its risks, but it eliminates the unseen danger of some dork mowing

Amid the shattered bikes I saw at least three people lying still on the road.

you down with a five tonne truck from behind or, worse, of being skewered alive by some Sir Lancelot carrying heavy metal rods on an unstoppable, overloaded, manually powered cyclo. People mostly gave way to front runners because if they didn't, they would risk having their front wheels turned by the bike ahead, sometimes with fatal consequences. If this occurred the front runner would just continue on his way as if nothing has happened leaving the hapless victim to his or her grisly fate. It was the rules of the road in Bizarro World. I once saw a young woman fly through the red light of an intersection and hit an old man on a bicycle. The old guy shot about 5 metres into the air and came down like a piledriver straight onto the top of his head. Miraculously he was wearing a yellow plastic construction hat that actually stayed on his head, although I guess following the accident it may have become a part of his head! Anyway it saved his life. While he lay there dazed on the road, the young woman hopped back on her bike and took off. No way was she going to wait around to pay 'blood money' compensation.

Saigon: Now Land of the Motorbike. Originally Almost Everyone Rode Czechoslovakian Bicycles

Two toots of my horn let others know to get out of the way or wear a heavy chopper and a 90 kilo Westerner down their throats. Most Vietnamese males weigh in at about 55 kilos, the females at only 46 kilos. The vast majority ride only light 100cc bikes. If I hit one at speed with my big chopper (a completely impracticable vehicle for Saigon) they'll take a journey to the moon on a one-way ticket. However, just then, even faster, came a reckless young ruffian who hit my arm with his side mirror as he passed while swerving to miss a pothole. I shouted at him in Vietnamese as he whizzed by. He casually looked over his shoulder in vague surprise not understanding a word of my pronunciation of his six tone language and probably wondering what the mad 'Russian', now giving him the finger, carrying on about. Accept when drunk, Vietnamese males, and all Vietnamese females, were non confrontational when on the roads.

All of a sudden, from amid the crowd on the sidewalk, a young boy suddenly streaked onto the road without looking, chasing a deflated soccer ball, looking neither right nor left. There are few if any real recreational parks in Saigon. The children have to play somewhere I suppose, so why not in the busy road? After all, this was 'Bizarro World'. I saw him and instantly whacked on the back brake. The rear wheel shot out to the right, as always, taking the back of my black chopper with it. It never failed. No worries, I was ready for it. Down came my left leg, foot off the gear lever, to act as a prop like one often sees in

speedway events. The boy lived to play another day and on I shot, changing gear before leaning back once again. It's important to always look good on a chopper regardless of any dire circumstances encountered along the way.

The traffic got even thicker. I found myself surrounded mainly by scruffy looking Vietnamese men carrying all sorts of things on their bikes from computers and fridges, to double mattresses strapped sideways across the backs of their saddles. The other day I'd laughed when I saw some dude navigating through the traffic with a new washing machine strapped to his back seat. Directly to my left, however, was a classic Vietnamese beauty, once again looking steadfastly ahead, so as not to seem flirtatious. But I know she saw me and was perhaps wondering if I was a foreigner who was rich and eligible. In the big dick department, Vietnamese men can't compete, so if you want to find a beautiful, young wife, half your age, Saigon is the place to be. But don't forget to bring your wallet because it's definitely a case of: 'No money, no honey'.

Author on a Chinese Bike. Like Everywhere Chinese Goods Now Dominate the Local Market

We were moving again. I looked for directions and for signs. Nothing, not one word, was in English, but I read Vietnamese fairly well so I was relaxed. It was not as bad as being in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. There all the signs were in Arabic, which I also read as a legacy of my days living in the Middle East while in the military and as a project manager. In Riyadh the cars, most of which travelled at breakneck speed, were ready to run you down at any second, and without the least sign of remorse from the mostly cheaply hired Bangladeshi drivers. No one rode a motorbike in Riyadh, or those that tried were now long gone to the happy hunting ground, or to Allah, whichever was their preference. In Saudi Arabia there were only testosterone crazed male drivers. There was none of the moderating influence of more cautious females, since they were not allowed to drive. When driving in Riyadh it was definitely a case of survival of the fittest.

There was an argument for not letting Arab women drive. I recall once watching a woman driving along a quiet street in the suburbs of Cario in Egypt, when suddenly, and without any reason, she crashed into a car parked on the side of the road. On another occasion in Perth, Australia, while reversing, a Syrian woman managed to do a 90 degree turn and crash into my Mercedes, a seemingly impossible feat since I was parked about 5 metres away and almost parallel to her. This incident in Perth also reminds me of my own ex-wife's effort when she once alighted from her car on our steep driveway in Perth without applying the parking brake or

In Riyadh the cars, most of which travelled at breakneck speed, were ready to run you down at any second, and without the least sign of remorse from the mostly cheaply hired Bangladeshi drivers.

'Faster than fairies, faster than witches, bridges, houses, hedges, ditches...' And so on I whizzed.

leaving the car in gear. In an instant the car flew off down the slope, narrowly failing to take her along with it. At the bottom of the drive it took off and went airborne across the road like a missile only stopping when it had totally demolished the front of the opposite neighbour's house. Thankfully there were no casualties, other than my own mental state since at the time I was standing at our front door watching helpless, as if in slow motion, as the car went on its merry way. The car went 'All the way', as they used to say in the 101st Airborne Division I was attached to as a liaison officer while serving in the Sinai.

All shops in Vietnam helpfully had their address on their front signs so as I rode along on my trusty chopper I learned that I was now in District 5, Cho Lon, or 'Big Market' in the local parlance. However, apart from the odd bit of Chinese writing, District 5 had increasingly lost its unique Chinese identity, since most of the Chinese who lived there had fled as boat people in 1989, a full year after I first came to Vietnam to undertake my initial business venture. In those days there was little electricity available, vodka was 20c a bottle and you could buy Russian caviar, or even slaves, from my dear old friend, Lu Long, the clever Chinese shoe merchant who had the shop on Le Thanh Ton Street.

I tore on, roaring past the traffic cops in their funny pink uniforms. As always the cops were randomly stopping riders like sharks feasting off unlucky individuals from a vast school of passing fish. A poem I once learned when a child in England echoed in my mind…'Faster than fairies, faster than witches, bridges, houses, hedges, ditches...' And so on I whizzed. The school was getting close now. I only had to cut down a one way street against the traffic to save a few minutes. *'Get out of the way or die'* I mentally shouted. It was all routine stuff, however, and none of the on-coming traffic seemed to bother much about my contrary direction. Apart from the odd drop in from the Mekong Delta imported in as cheap labour, the rest were born in Saigon and had experienced little else; they all knew the score: 'Who dares wins', as they say in the SAS.

Of course, this journey had been relatively uneventful. The trips back home after my night classes were usually far more adventurous. It is dark then, and the road lighting woeful. At least a quarter of the riders travelled without lights! Many were drunk. And the six wheeler trucks were always out in force after dark, the only time when they were allowed to travel into the city. Sundays could be tough too, as I sometimes went for a spin after the 'Big Lunch with the Boys' day, while the others played darts, or even worse, pool, a game I can't abide. One Sunday I rode after consuming a blue martini, a coconut martini, a tequila sunrise, three big glasses of red wine, and seven, yes, seven double grand marnias. Irresponsible? You don't know what the word means until you have endured the stress and adrenalin rush of the traffic in Saigon. But, yes, I do acknowledge that speed can kill on the road, and that liquor definitely makes it quicker. However, when in Rome...

Ah, I had arrived at my destination at last. I screamed through the large metal gates of the school with a roar, and gave a friendly wave to the security man, all to the admiring and adoring looks of the many gorgeous teenage female students, milling around in the courtyard chattering like so many birds in their high-pitched, tonal Vietnamese. *'Our Hero'* Chris, the Australian English teacher had arrived at school for yet another day. I switched off my engine, removed my helmet and beamed at my fans.

Going to school was never this good back in Oz.

What Price Freedom?

In the early days of my travelling to Vietnam I faced the vexatious problem of how to obtain a visa and organise the trip with only limited flights going to that destination. In those days of the late 80's, almost no airplanes flew into Vietnam. However, the French, despite their questionable history in Vietnam, were very quick off the mark when the country was once again opened to foreign visitors. The smell of money does that to some. Consequently, Air France started the first new international service that flew, on Thursdays I think it was, once a week from Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City.

Boarding a quiet, air-conditioned Air France flight as a first class passenger, as I was in those heady big-spending days of the late 80's, and departing home again from the noisy, stinking, poverty-stricken and steaming chaos of the Mekong Delta, where I was undertaking aquaculture operations, was akin to what it must be like to ascend into Heaven. With a glass of champagne in my hand I used to look down from above at the snaking Mekong River with his multi dragon heads Delta and wonder about how the people living down there managed to survive. It was hardship personified. I'd once placed an advert in the local paper looking for employees for our aquaculture venture. One response came in the form of a short letter from some poor individual residing near Long Xuyen, deep in the Delta country. He told me he needed the job because the heads of all his ducks had swelled and shortly afterwards they had died; now he couldn't make a living. He didn't get the job. There were a hundred replies containing sad tales like his. I only remember his because of the ducks. Looking down from above I wondered about him and worried about how he was managing to support his family. Maybe from time to time God does the same thing with all of us

The New Vietnam Airlines Planes are a Big Improvement on the Old, Cast Off Soviet Aircraft the Author Experienced in the Late 80's. Note the Blast Shelters that Still Exist as a Relic of the American War at Ton Son Nhat Airport in Saigon.

Flying within the newly emerging country via the domestic airline, Air Vietnam, was, of course, an entirely different matter from enjoying the first class luxury offered by Air France. Vietnam inherited its domestic air fleet from Soviet AeroFlot's old cast off planes, most of which were in a highly questionable condition before they even reached the 'land of no maintenance'. Discipline, organisation, and maintenance are the three factors that separate the First from the Third World; Vietnam practised none of these attributes, especially when it came to spending money on the maintenance of its aircraft. I suppose it could now be argued that many of the First World youth have lost a lot of those three attributes too, thus heralding the decline of the West. The undermining of the supreme role of motherhood by Feminists, together with the emasculation of fathers due to an over adherence to political correctness, hasn't helped either.

The Vietnam Airlines planes were unique in that they sported broken seats that flipped down to lie completely flat, never to arise again. Often planes would shoot off down the runways to take off while passengers, none of whom were allocated specific seats, still argued and

Vietnam inherited its domestic air fleet from Soviet AeroFlot's old cast off planes, most of which were in a highly questionable condition before they even reached the 'land of no maintenance'.

squabbled in the aisles about where they would sit. An in-flight meal consisted of a few dry biscuits, a slab of some sort of processed meat, and some boiled sweets. Once I sat next to a poet who was returning to Hanoi after wasting his impoverished county's money at some art festival in Bulgaria. Another time it was a Vietnamese Colonel in full uniform who was my travelling companion. I'd trained for four years at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in Australia, to shoot guys like this. I offered the kindly Colonel my bag of boiled sweets for his children. At first he refused to take it. He wanted to maintain 'Face' in front of the young Westerner. However, he was also poor, and I mean very, very poor; he really did want the sweets for his children. Eventually I persuaded him to take them by saying otherwise they would be thrown away. It was the first time I learned that with careful and considerate conversation, even oriental Face could be overcome. This was later to serve me in good stead in a much more poignant situation when I encountered an old man whose son had been killed in the American War.

Motorbike Taxi Driver Waiting for Work

On arrival at Hanoi, an army truck would come out to pick up the passengers and their baggage. Once I even got to fly back to Saigon in the back of some old Soviet bomber, a flight that absolutely terrified my Western companion, and client, Fatman. Fatman hated flying even more than I did. Being a weird sort of a guy, I gained some bizarre distraction from my own terror by watching Fatman tremble and sweat profusely at the slightest sign of turbulence. Many was the time I silently asked myself the question of what I was doing gadding about in such unsafe aircraft, and if the money was really worth it. A year or two later, I heard that a Vietnam Airlines plane had crashed about a kilometre short of the runway in Bangkok due to having insufficient fuel to fly the full distance. The Vietnamese always put in the absolute minimum fuel in order to lessen the weight and thus cut costs. Apparently the monsoon winds had made a fatal difference, or so the story went. The unfortunate Third Secretary of the Australian Embassy was killed in that crash. It was his bad karma to have had the 'goffer run' in that week. Only a few months earlier he'd tried to steal my contract formats so he could freelance his services to business visitors to the Embassy. There was no connection between the two events of course. Another Vietnamese colleague of mine was killed in the crash of a flight to one of the regional cities a short time later. This did nothing to enhance confidence in flying via Vietnam Airlines.

One lasting memory I have of flying with Vietnam Airlines in those early days was when boarding a busted up plane in Saigon with Fatman on a really hot sweaty day in Saigon. We'd just returned from a hard trip to the Mekong Delta. All

Delta trips were hard. We were near the end of our tether. Things were tough in those days. Besides, my flying-hating friend had his nerves really on edge at the thought of yet another life-threatening flight. But things were improving. On this particular flight we were actually allocated seats, because nothing is ever predictable in Vietnam, even today. It's that sort of a place where nearly everything is a surprise, sometimes a pleasant one, and at other times not so pleasant: even the surprises were unpredictable! An acquaintance of mine, Big Geoff, always chanted the mantra: 'You must have no expectations in Vietnam, and then you'll never be disappointed'. However, on reaching our seats we were confronted with some skinny Japanese businessman attired in the standard issue white shirt and black suit of the 80's, clutching his briefcase. He was sitting in Fatman's allotted place and looked up at us with big, apprehensive and bespectacled eyes. He was committing a sin and, unknown to him, in our eyes had inherited the collective sins of his countrymen.

In those early years Fatman's brother-in-law, the one who got ripped off by the money changer, was a food technician who produced fish in the huge Vietnamese fish processing factories for the Australian market. However, the desperate and impoverished Vietnamese were using our processed fish to pay the Japanese for their refrigeration and cold storage installations. So, understandably, we had no love for Japanese businessmen in Vietnam. And lo and behold here was one of these slimebags sitting right before us in Fatman's seat! Our being confronted by this Japanese businessman left us no room for political correctness. He instantly became the focus of our fear of flying in Vietnamese planes, as well as for the Japanese being given our fish product. And don't dare mention the war and all the Australian servicemen murdered in places like Changi and the Burma Railroad! Fatman screamed: 'Chris, get that damned Jap out of my seat, and right now!' I was the contracted man, remember, some years younger than Fatman, and a heck of a lot fitter, nearly everyone on the planet was. I welcomed the call to arms. Talk about Freudian 'aggression transference' at play. I don't know if the poor Jap guy spoke English, but you've never seen a passenger move faster from point A to point B. There was no need for me to make him 'do the chicken' in a very slow and painful way. Ha ha...I can still recall this incident today so clearly in my mind's eye. Fatman and I were ready to kill anything or anyone in our way, and probably would have if it or they were foolish enough to remain there. That's how it was in those days in Vietnam.

That Japanese businessman so resplendent and sartorial in his white shirt and black tie now reminds me of an incident with a whole busload of these critters in the red light district of Kings Cross in Sydney in the early 70's. I was on leave at the time from the Army and had met up with some American brothers-in-arms on R&R leave from Vietnam. Naturally we'd had quite a few beers while inspecting all the local strip joints in the Cross, which really jumped in those days of the American War due to the injection of so much American cash, or as one of my American friends so grandly expressed it: 'It's just American generosity in exchange for Australian hospitality'. After yet more beers I'd just nipped around the back of a building to gain some quick relief by urinating on a convenient wall when all of a sudden a whole busload of these white shirt, black clad Japanese businessmen walked around the corner and straight into me. I don't know who was more surprised by the encounter. What could I do in mid stream? So I just looked up and smiled widely saying: 'Ah so...Ah so'. It seemed to do the trick. Amid plenty of 'Ah sos' and many smiles and bows in return, they went on their collective way. Now I wonder, looking back, if they were really saying to me 'Ah so' or 'Arsehole', but I just couldn't pick their accent.

'It's just American generosity in exchange for Australian hospitality'

The Vietnamese Embassy in Thailand at that time was established in some ancient building tucked away in a corner of some God-forsaken suburb of Bangkok. All I remember is that it took at least fifty minutes by taxi from the Embassy to the airport because in those days there was no convenient overhead freeway or direct skytrain running from the city to the airport, as there is now. The one plane a week that flew between Bangkok and Saigon left at around 1.30pm and the Embassy visa section only opened at 10am on the same day the plane left. It's always that way with all Embassies and Consulates. If the lazy staff can in any way be unhelpful, arrogant, and generally incompetent, they will be. This particularly applies to the visa sections of all these institutions, regardless of nationality, because they control something people really need. The locally hired staff is usually the worst of the worst to deal with. Maybe it's because one seldom gets to deal with the actual national staff since they are all too lazy to put themselves out to provide the service they are overly rewarded to perform. Am I alone in this opinion, I wonder.

Early Example of a Typical Vietnamese Government Office or Embassy

I recall during our first few months in Vietnam, Fatman and I had decided to drop by the Australian Ambassador's residence to give our friendly greetings to our national representative. At that time Australian visitors were very few and far between. We had an appointment to see the Prime Minister at 10am that morning, and the Australian Ambassador at 2pm in the afternoon. However, early in the morning of our appointment a government official came to our hotel and informed us that the Prime Minister could only see us at 2pm. We therefore decided to drop in at the Ambassador's residence to say 'hello' at 10am. In those days there were very few telephones in Vietnam, and certainly none at the hotel, so we couldn't call him ahead of time. To make an international phone call out from Hanoi you had to book from a government office at least 6 hours ahead and phone via the Moscow telephone exchange. Anyway, we arrived at the Embassy full of goodwill, feeling very proud of ourselves for being the first Australian businessmen to enter Vietnam. To our surprise we received a rocket from the irate Ambassador who appeared before us replete in his pyjamas for having the nerve to arrive at 10am instead of at 2pm. That poor man didn't know whom he was rocketing. Fatman and I immediately reminded him in a way he would never forget. Australians can be like that with their idiot government officials. Goodwill? Phooey.

As I've said I have found most Australian Embassies and their staff around the world to be equally useless. In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, they used to invite everyone and his dog to their Consulate parties so they could sell duty free beer for extortionate prices in this alcohol free country. Naturally they never invited fellow Australians, not wanting their money-making scheme to be made known back home. Once when in India I thought it would be worthwhile to take a trip north to the legendary settlement of Kathmandu, near the roof of the world. I had no visa and was unsure of the entry procedures so, after much trouble, I managed to phone the Australian Embassy back in Delhi, no mean feat during those years of dire poverty in the mid 70's. After talking for about ten minutes and explaining my situation in great detail over a faulty phone my patient listener finally confessed that he couldn't help me, saying: 'Oh my goodness gracious, sir, I'm being very sorry, but I cannot be helping you this very fine day, as I am only the cleaner'! I recall throwing the phone down in disgust. It was a typical response from an Australian Embassy, the only difference was that the cleaner was at least polite and had the courtesy to listen to my problem, which is more than can be said for most Australian Embassy staff one encounters around the world. I eventually got to Kathmandu and had a rather dire experience with a couple of drug dealers there that saw them come off very much the worse for it; however, that is another story for another time perhaps.

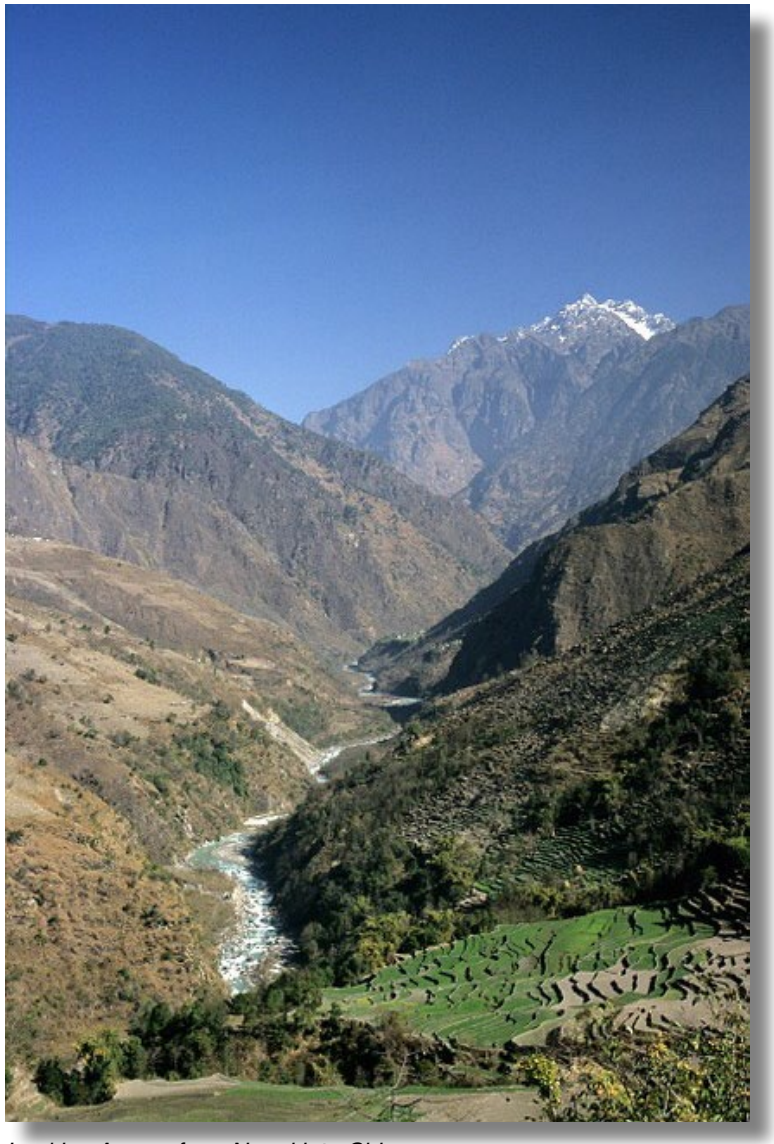
Having failed to find out about the visa to Nepal, from New Delhi I decided to fly down to the Hindus' most holy city of Varanasi situated on the southern bank of the mighty River Ganges. I found this river to be one of the most intriguing rivers in the world and easily the equal of the mighty Mekong. Varanasi is one of the oldest cities in a very ancient land and is the site of the yearly ritual bathing for millions of Hindu believers. It's also where the bodies of the dead are burnt and their ashes thrown into the river. I remember standing on the edges of the Ganges drinking a coke and madly trying to stop clouds of body ashes from contaminating my drink. For the poor there were no funeral pyres, their bodies were merely cast into the Ganges after a basic ceremony and left to the whims of the huge crocodiles that lined the banks ready for their next meal. Only pure children and pregnant women were thought not to need the cleansing of the funeral pyre. However, when you are dirt poor and can't pay for a pyre you have no choice but to take your chances of getting to the next reincarnation via the mouth of a crocodile. Maybe a few of the Bombay vultures are urgently needed in Varanasi to stop the constant pollution caused by swollen bodies

Varanasi is one of the oldest cities in a very ancient land and is the site of the yearly ritual bathing for millions of Hindu believers.

Priority Traffic in India

Varanasi was a strange place, full of little winding alleyways and overhanging buildings centuries old.

being washed ashore during the flood season because the fat crocodiles just can't cope with the surplus demand.



Looking Across from Nepal into China

Varanasi was a strange place, full of little winding alleyways and overhanging buildings centuries old. I met up with a young merchant there who took me to his house for lunch. I recall eating incredibly hot food from unwashed plates. How did I survive this ordeal I still wonder? It wasn't the chilli food so much as the dirty plates that turned my poor long suffering stomach, already 'out of order' after drinking a polluted cup of sweet tea while sitting on the deck of an overcrowded ferry travelling from Goa to the city then named Bombay. The young merchant operated a silk brocade business and his sister was about to be married. While in Bombay I had bought with the rupee earning of my grandfather's books twenty three carat gold and turned it into plain gold rings and necklaces so I could transport the small fortune back to Australia and sell it at the Perth Royal Mint. One of these gold rings I traded with the merchant for silks so he could give a wedding present of almost pure gold to his sister. He promised to send the silks to me in Australia. This was the first and last time I would ever trust an Indian businessman. Predictably for those who have tried to do business in India, the silks never arrived despite my later writing to him and eventually threatening to come back to India to kill him, his wife, his sister and all his kids. If you want to remain poor all your life start trying to do business with Indian traders.

Much later I finally reached Kathmandu and obtained a visa on arrival at the airport. I took the risk about this and it paid off. At the time of my arrival a Hindu festival involving the ritual slaughter of goats and any similar innocent victims of human religious mania was occurring. It was all a rather bloody affair and perhaps a fitting introduction to what I would personally experience later during my stay with respect to the drug dealers now long at rest. I soon found a half reasonable hotel and managed to book myself on a Land Rover tour of the surrounding Himalayas. This involved driving at breakneck speeds along precipitous

roads that ran alongside deep ravines, complete with fast flowing streams. As we tore around blind corners all I could think of were the many newspaper stories I had read about people being killed in Third World countries after crashing down sheer cliffs onto the jagged rocks below. Happily my worst fears never came to pass.

The stream in one of the deepest ravines I saw marked the border between Nepal and her imposing, brooding neighbour, China. One could easily spot Chinese soldiers from time to time lounging in sentry posts while keeping a watchful eye on the Nepalese. It was the era of Mao's Cultural Revolution and the Chinese, not well disposed to foreigners at the best of times, were acting particularly unfriendly. However, when have the young and adventurous at heart ever displayed good sense? Therefore at one stage I slipped away from the small tour group and crossed the freezing mountain stream so I could claim that I had at least been to China, which in those days was no mean feat among travellers. It was a rather foolhardy thing to do, but when you're young and daring this is the sort of nonsense you get up to. Eventually our guide, a short, stocky Nepalese, ex-Ghurkha, came running back down the track to look for me and was horrified to see me sitting on the other side of the stream in China. When I returned through the freezing mountain water at his beckoning he said laughingly that he thought I'd try something crazy like that and he'd expected to find only my dead body. When he told me that, with his happy round face and funny accent, I just had to laugh too. It was the way he pronounced 'deeed boodie' that I found so funny. Our dear guide was a friendly enough character, but perhaps somewhat of a drama queen.

Getting visas to Third World countries was forever a struggle in past days prior to proper computerization. It still is for countries like India and Saudi Arabia. You can completely forget about obtaining a visa to the latter country if you are a single female or are trying to attend a commercial activity such as a trade show. In those initial days of the opening up of the country, visiting the unpainted and dilapidated Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok was the only way to get a visa into Vietnam without having to wait for months. It was a big contrast to a later visit of mine to the Vietnamese Embassy in Warsaw, Poland. There I encountered dapper little Vietnamese diplomats mincing and cavorting around like the other trained diplomatic monkeys of their kind. They wore skin-tight sharpie suits and cruised around in Mercedes Benz cars. All this while their impoverished countrymen at home lived on the absolute breadline, or rather on a half full rice bowl. It was obscene.

Luckily, in those very early days of Vietnam opening its doors to foreigners, there were usually only one or two desperate souls like me seeking a visa at the Embassy in Bangkok in order to go to the newly opened Mecca of business opportunity. The word about the commercial opportunities available had not yet reached the ears of the multitudes, partly because the various trade officials of countries were too busy drinking pink gins in established markets like Singapore rather than putting in the hard yards of opening new ones in Vietnam. For them Vietnam was still in the 'too hard' basket. I have a strange and uncomfortable feeling that even these days when posted to the paradise of IndoChina, these trade officials still get paid a hardship allowance. It's an absolute affront to the taxpayers.

It was always a tearing rush to get the visa to Vietnam and then catch the only weekly Air France fight after dashing through the notorious Bangkok traffic in order to reach the airport in time. If you missed the plane, you had to wait a whole week for the next one and then get your visa all over again, as it was only valid for the same day of entry. Only deviously accomplished veteran visa staff

One could easily spot Chinese soldiers from time to time lounging in sentry posts while keeping a watchful eye on the Nepalese.

Nearly all the ordinary Vietnamese I met when first entering the country were a humble, yet noble, people.

could think up this sort of a nightmare scenario. A year later, after gaining much experience, I was a veteran when it came to obtaining the much-prized Vietnam visa and arriving at Bangkok airport to catch the weekly flight with only minutes to spare. This was even though the numbers requiring visas gradually grew from one or two, to a small group, and finally to a veritable throng, all pushing and shoving when trying to gain the Holy Grail of the mandatory visa in time to make it to the plane. I knew the ropes well and worked them all to get served first. Those among the throngs of fresh-faced 'newbies' lower down in the queue nearly always missed the fabled flight. It was truly a case of 'survival of the fittest'.

Enjoying the View in India

Just as the American West was first opened by the hunters and trappers before the ranchers, farmers, then the 'city slickers' arrived, so newly opened countries like Vietnam first experienced the adventurers, gypsies, opportunity seekers, and traders like me with virtually no assets looking either to escape from their pasts or to make their quick fortune. Indirectly the 'new guy's on the block' quickly educated the locals about the commercial realities of the open market the hard way. Looking back in respect to Vietnam, it's hard to know if the carpet-baggers or the locals got the worse end of the myriad of bad deals. It was a war of bullshit and attrition at the best of times. All I can recall is that many a cocky and over-confident Westerner left Vietnam shirtless in those rock-and-roll days. Mostly it was the bigger corporations who suffered the worst, because the middle management, petty-politically oriented clones they exported into Vietnam had absolutely no idea how to cope with the Vietnamese, their culture, or even their climate. Many had never really lived outside of their home countries. They were like lambs to the slaughter. Luckily, we 'free riders' inflicted our toll on the tricky locals to help balance the score.

Nearly all the ordinary Vietnamese I met when first entering the country were a humble, yet noble, people. Unfortunately, there were also a few of the 'Viet Kieu'. The latter were foreign Vietnamese, mainly from refugee families who had fled to the US and other foreign countries after the fall of Saigon in April 1975. When the country was reopened they began returning in increasing numbers to visit their relatives in the home country. They brought with them some of the more unsavoury ways they had learned in the West. Their Vietnamese relatives relied on the Viet Kieu for extra money during those hard days, but they must also have wondered about their change in values from those espoused within the traditional Vietnamese society. It was a love-hate relationship between the

old and the new that continues to this day with the Viet Kieu becoming ever less influential as the wealth and worldliness of the national Vietnamese, especially in the main cities, increases.

You could always spot those families who had Viet Kieu relatives at the 'ticket dances'. These dances were organised at the top of some of the larger hotels and restaurants. You could buy a ticket to dance with a lady. The only ladies who had evening dresses instead of the simple pyjama suits were those with Viet Kieu relatives able to send them from overseas either the dresses or the money to buy them.

The poverty I experienced even in the worst time of the late 80's in Vietnam never came anywhere near to that I witnessed in India in the mid 70's. And Calcutta was the worst of the worst. In Calcutta I had decided to pay a visit to Mother Teresa who, along with her devoted Sisters of Mercy, ran the 'Home of the Dying and the Destitute' and the 'Children's Home' situated in the poorest region of north Calcutta. On arrival into the chaos of Calcutta my first priority was to find some reasonable local accommodation not an easy task in Calcutta during those years. I decided that discretion was required after my last adventure with some drug dealers in Kathmandu, so I wanted to lay low for a while. If you ever wanted to lose yourself, there were few better places on this earth than the teeming, decaying city of Calcutta in the 70's. After wandering the backstreets of the southern part of the city for some time, I finally stumbled across an old colonial building called 'The Great Eastern Hotel'. In the past days of the British Empire this hotel must have been a grand old lady and was even then still a Calcutta landmark, though now it was now really only fit for semi-vagrants like myself. In some ways The Great Eastern Hotel helped prepare me for my latter stays in such unspectacular hotels such as the 'Ritz' (which was anything but the Ritz), in Vietnam.

Once I'd dropped off my rucksack I set out on a hot Calcutta day, minus the Nepalese hat I'd gained along the way in exchange for my jacket, in search of the saint to be. Forget

Local Meat Delivery in Calcutta

Butcher's Shop in Calcutta

The poverty I experienced even in the worst time of the late 80's in Vietnam never came anywhere near to that I witnessed in India in the mid 70's.

However, in Calcutta, you reach the lowest of the low in rickshaw design and propulsion as the rickshaws there are still actually pulled along by a single thin man running between two poles extending at the front.

ever trying to catch a local bus to north Calcutta. The city had lots of faded old red London double deckers imported in times of old, still driving around the overcrowded streets, belching out clouds of thick blue diesel fumes. They were so densely packed with locals that thirty or so people were usually left hanging on the outside of each, making the bus tilt precariously towards the pavement as it sped along regardless of the dense traffic. I couldn't get on a bus so I elected to travel by rickshaw. It's amazing how the humble rickshaw can differ in design throughout the Third World. Some are horse drawn, others have little motorbikes attached; still others work by pedal power. However, in Calcutta, you reach the lowest of the low in rickshaw design and propulsion as the rickshaws there are still actually pulled along by a single thin man running between two poles extending at the front. It's like you see in the old movies of China.

Local Talent in Rajasthan

Naturally I felt bad as a fit 25 year old being pulled through the din and stink of the overcrowded streets by this skinny old man who looked to be about 60, but was probably about 40 years old. Yet once again rationalisation came to the rescue. If it wasn't for people like me he'd starve and at least I was going to pay him 5 times the amount he'd receive from a local. No one spared me so much as a critical glance while I travelled like a colonial overload of the once great British Raj. I read somewhere that Indian traffic, like Indian society was structured on a caste system. Therefore precedence was accorded, in descending order, to cows, heavy trucks, buses, official cars, camels, buffalo, ox-carts, private cars, motor bikes, auto rickshaws, bicycles, pedal rickshaws, dogs, man-powered rickshaws and finally pedestrians. My choice of man-powered rickshaw was thus a daring and risky decision.

In Calcutta, as elsewhere in India, the rich mingled uncaringly with the poor. Literally whole families spent their lives living and begging on the filthy streets and somehow survived to reach old age. An image now flashes across my mind of a tourist handing a member of a street family a slice of orange. Maybe that was the only thing the urchin had to eat that day! Another time I saw a kindly man buy an extremely ragged young boy a new set of underwear from a local stall. How else could he help? The problem of the poverty in Calcutta in the 70's was appalling and overwhelming. And at times I thought my later life in Perth as a 100% commission salesman was precarious! The rich of Calcutta, dressed in the latest fashions and adorned with gold jewellery, just passed by the destitute persons begging on the pavements without so much as a glance. Yes, the rich in India definitely had a lot in common with the wealthy in the United States. God spare us from a completely Capitalist system.

After a jog trot of about thirty minutes my rickshaw arrived outside the door of the 'Home for the Dying and the Destitute'. The Sisters there were flat out like the proverbial lizards drinking milk tending to those poor souls under their loving care, but they still had time to spare me a few kind words. Where were the Pope and all his finely dressed puppets at the Vatican? I remember all these overfed and richly adorned peacocks so well from my visit there. Unfortunately Mother Teresa was away on one of her constant fund raising activities, but I was enchanted when having the great honour and privilege of meeting the efficient Sister Agnes, the second in charge of the institution. Sister Agnes was a combination of grace, charm and no nonsense approach. She gave up some of her very valuable time and showed me around the institution. I witnessed just a few of the great deeds being undertaken by those humble sisters. I offered a donation but Sister Agnes kindly refused saying I should give this money to the Sisters of Mercy who were working with the aborigines in Australia. (I actually later saw these sisters hard at work helping Aboriginal people in Burke, in north-western New South Wales in Australia.) I gave the donation to Sister Agnes anyway and then accompanied her on a visit to the nearby 'Children's Home'.

At the 'Children's Home' the Sisters of Mercy were feeding, wait for it, 10,000, yes, 10,000, kids a day. If ever you feel inclined to donate money to a charity and really want to feel as if your donation is worthwhile, take it from one who was there and give your money to the Sisters of Mercy; have your donation earmarked for the 'Children's Home' in Calcutta. If my writing this chapter has the effect of only generating one big donation to that wonderful cause, it would have been all worthwhile. I made a second small donation at the 'Children's Home' and quickly departed so the Sisters could get on with their important work and not waste time talking to minor 'do gooders' like me. I quickly found another human-powered rickshaw at the end of the street and here the real fun began.

My mission was to explain to the rickshaw driver, who not being of the educated classes, spoke not a single word of English that he had to convey me to the Great Eastern Hotel in south Calcutta. It was impossible. I had to ask some passerby to translate to the rickshaw driver for me. It now seemed that no one in Calcutta had ever heard of The Great Eastern Hotel, let alone knew how to get there. Standing by the rickshaw I called out to a second passing well-dressed pedestrian and asked him

Author with his Beloved Uncle Don, Famed Environmentalist at a Jungle Hut in Karnataka, India

The old man's hut, like nearly all others in the region, was almost devoid of furniture.

if he'd heard of The Great Eastern Hotel. He stopped and repeated the name in the very fast, lilting English used by the educated citizens of Calcutta as though that action would suddenly have the effect of making him remember where a hotel was he'd never even heard of prior to our chance encounter: Ze Greeet Eastern Otell? Ze Greeet Eastern Otell? H'mm...Ze Greeet Eastern Otell? Of course he had no idea where the hotel was, but there was no way he was going to lose face by admitting that fact to me, a Westerner. Instead he consulted another passerby who also had no clue either, but again he wasn't about to let that little fact be known to all and sundry. Before I knew it I had half of Calcutta seemed to be arguing on the street as to where this famous hotel was located. The din was incredible as each kept stupidly repeating to himself over and over again the name of this famous old building as though this would make it magically appear in front of us. You could take your pick which way to go because the points of the compass seemed to be equally represented by their contradictory opinions!

Eventually I left the gathered crowd to all rant and rave about the directions to The Great Eastern Hotel among themselves. I didn't want to be arrested for causing a riot. It was a typical result of being silly enough to ask anyone directions in a Third World country. As an experienced traveller I should have known better. Maybe they are still there arguing among themselves to this day!

Like I did in the mid 70's in India, over a decade later I used to travel the length and breadth of Vietnam looking for opportunities and adventures in those early days of foreign investment, encountering and avoiding the occasional oily Viet Kieu who spoke English, and meeting up with and enjoyed the company of the occasional old US veteran along the way. US and Australian Veterans were also beginning to return in increasing numbers to try to expiate their own private memories of the past. They were not the only ones with hard memories of the American War. Once, when roving about the Mekong Delta countryside near the uncharted, and still unstable, Vietnam-Cambodia border, I stopped with my local guide to visit an old Vietnamese grandfather who lived in a small hut near a narrow tributary of the main River.

The old man's hut, like nearly all others in the region, was almost devoid of furniture. If you ever get to visit Uncle Ho Chi Minh's house in Hanoi, you will see he wasn't big on material possessions either. On a wall, in a place of honour for passed away relatives that all Vietnamese have in their homes, no matter how humble, was a small framed photo of the man's eldest son. I learned his son had been a Viet Cong active in the tunnel area of Cu Chi. Sadly, the boy, who looked to have been aged around 20 years, if indeed anyone can ever guess a Vietnamese's age, like so many

Making a Living on the Streets of Calcutta

other young men of his generation, had been killed in the 'American War'. Ho Chi Minh once said to the French that he could afford to lose 3 men to their 1 and still win. In the 'American War' Vietnam lost 20 to the enemy's 1, but still emerged victorious, such was the national will to win. The Vietnamese people as a whole won their freedom, independence and happiness; however, in the process many individual families, both in the North and the South, suffered the immeasurable loss of loved ones: what price freedom?

What on earth was the American War really all about and why did so many of us from the West fight in it anyway? It's obviously a rhetorical question that no one can answer satisfactorily. When talking about his son, the withered old man displayed no malice towards me in the slightest, even though he must have known I was a citizen from a country, Australia, which had a military presence in the South supporting a corrupt and despotic regime; nor did he utter any bitter words about the War, or its devastating effect on his family. However, it was plain to me that the loss of his son was as big a blow to him as the loss of one of my sons in such a senseless war would have been to me. It was a particularly poignant meeting for me, having graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in Australia, after 4 long years of training to fight in Vietnam, only to have Australia's involvement in the War stop the very year I graduated as a young Lieutenant of Artillery. To think I could have been sent to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam to try to kill someone like this old man's son! Perish the very thought of it! I know as a global traveller, to a Vietnamese, more than to any other people, family means absolutely everything. Not surprisingly, nearly eighty per cent of Vietnamese are neither really Buddhist nor Catholic, but devout ancestor worshippers.

On leaving the old man's home I offered him a USD100. It was all I had on me. What else could I do? It was more than a year's worth of income for him during those very difficult days, especially in the Delta countryside. I suspected he would be a proud man who, despite his utter poverty, would probably not want the gift. Sure enough he refused it. However, my encounter with the colonel on the plane earlier on about the sweets allowed me to be ready for his polite decline. I let him know that the money wasn't for him, but for his grandson's birthday. Surely he knew it was unlucky to refuse to take a birthday present for his grandson. That line caught him unawares and while he was still considering the bad luck that might emanate

The Old Man's House on the Mekong (Rusty One on the Right)

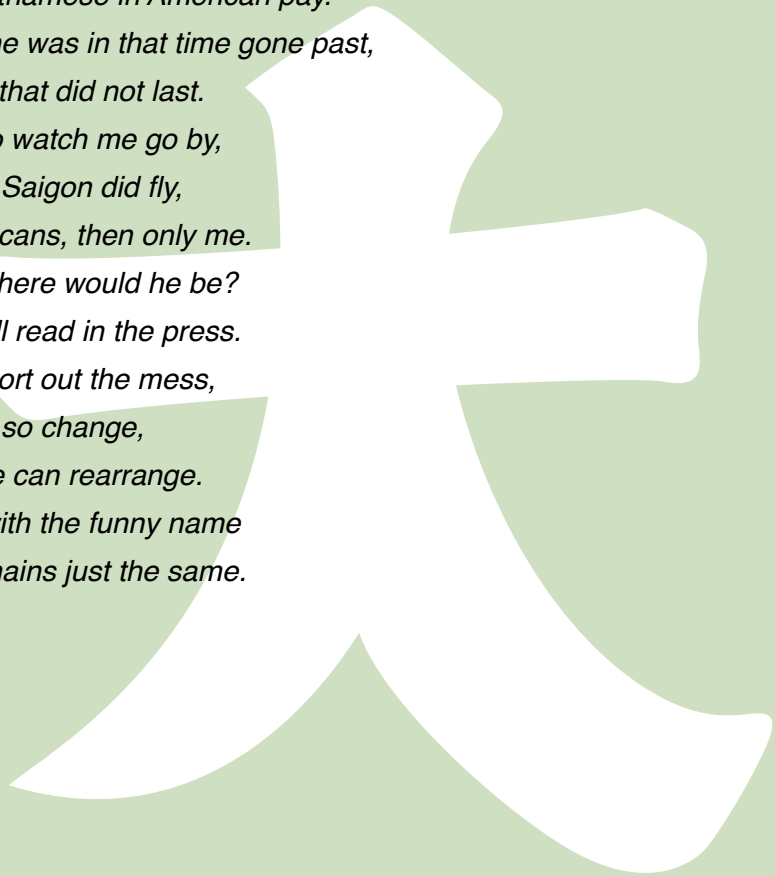
from his not accepting the gift I had left in his keeping, I was already waving my farewells from the window of my guide's government-supplied old Toyota car. Even now my eyes grow misty at the memory. Goddamn that terrible War!

I was satisfied that I had done a tiny good deed that may have brought some small comfort to that old man's difficult life. It was all I could do. I wish I could have done more. However you look at it, surely it was far better than dropping a 105mm artillery round on him or his family.

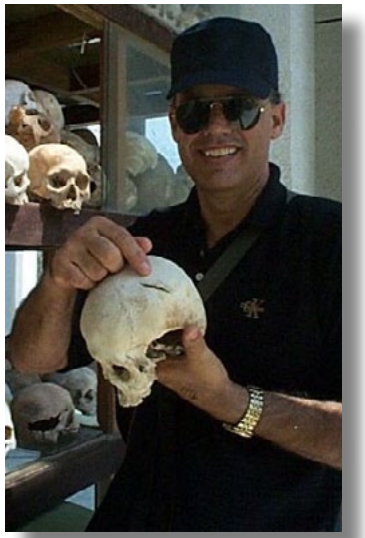
Giving something, even if it's small, is surely better than receiving: a big 'Amen' to that, brother.

The Quiet Vietnamese

He sat still on his stool as he did every day,
The Quiet Vietnamese in American pay.
Well at least he was in that time gone past,
From a corrupt old regime that did not last.
Now he sits and smokes to watch me go by,
Another Westerner who to Saigon did fly,
First the French, the Americans, then only me.
Without us colonials just where would he be?
It's the new Vietnam, we all read in the press.
The Westerners arrive to sort out the mess,
But what of the East can it so change,
The economy of course we can rearrange.
But the man on the stool with the funny name
The Quiet Vietnamese remains just the same.



Sophie's Bar in Phnom Penh



Author at the Killing Fields: Machete Cut to the Head. Ouch, that Must Have Hurt!

Phnom Penh sits easily on the banks of the Mekong River. It is tiny compared to Saigon or New York even though it boasts the same system of numbered streets as that fabled US city and can be just as dirty (especially if one thinks back to the New York of the late 70's). However, Phnom Penh does have its own special charm to the hardened expat. Its expats are of an entirely different type to those one encounters in Vietnam or Thailand, just as guys who sell insurance are different to those who sell cars, mobile phones, or real estate. However, like their brothers in Vietnam and Thailand, they are fringe dwellers who have finally found some place of happiness in a world that accepts them for what they are for all their home county misfit complexities, just as they have accepted that 'world' of Cambodia for all its heat and disorganised filth. Phnom Penh's expats are yet more lost souls adrift in the chaos of the developing world; they are souls who never really want to be found or saved.

My own special type of filthy chaos in Cambodia was not the Killing Fields, or even the horrific Tuoi Sleng prison located in the grounds of a former high school of all places (only in Cambodia!) but in the humble 'Sophie's Bar' hidden in 'those days' at the very centre of downtown Phnom Penh. Naturally this exceedingly seedy bar was always filled with equally seedy young Khmer and Vietnamese women in ultra short skirts. However, before I get onto any entertaining gossip about the infamous Sophie's Bar, let me first digress a little and talk about my first visit to the nearby notorious Tuoi Sleng prison that was also located in the inner suburbs of Phnom Penh not too far from the bar. I've seen most things in this small world of ours that are commonly held as being worth seeing. However, I admit that initially visiting this place of torture was something of an experience. I had already been to the huge death camps at Auschwitz 1 and 2, in distant Poland, and even, of all places, the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussauds in London, so I was well prepared for the horrors I encountered at Tuoi Sleng.

Horror has a way of clutching at your soul, no matter how much you have experienced it, even vicariously. In Tuoi Sleng the horror is mostly manifest in the hundreds of black and white photos of the victims' faces that are displayed all over the walls: so many of these victims were children. The children's pictures serve as a bizarre reminder that the camp was originally a high school. Up until a little after the turn of this Century when I first visited it, this Cambodian prison camp was largely the same as it was in the days of Pol Pot, as was most of Cambodia, in fact. In Cambodia, like in Vietnam, things didn't really start to develop in a big way until well after 2007.

To get to Phnom Penh from Saigon in 'those days' one either journeyed up the Mekong by way of any one of the numerous small rickety boats, or took a two hour bus trip

Photo Taken at the Mekong Crossing Point Later When the Road to Phnom Penh was Surfaced and Buses Finally Started to Travel from Saigon.

from Saigon to the small Vietnamese border crossing post at Moc Bai. At that time there was no real corresponding Cambodian border post once one checked through the Soviet architecture monstrosity of a check point located on the Vietnamese side of the border. After leaving Vietnam you simply walked down a dusty dirt track to a small rundown cafe on the Cambodian side and casually got stamped in as you went by a lacklustre immigration official inhabiting a small wooden hut, taking care not to get run over by the droves of motorbikes plying back and forth across the border freely ferrying contraband this way and that. The cost of the Cambodian visa was USD20. It's always been USD20 for as long as I can remember. The first time I crossed I made the mistake of paying with a USD100 note. The Cambodian border police gave me four twenties in change. Unfortunately for me one of the notes was a forgery, and they knew it. It was my own special welcome to Cambodia.

Once at the cafe, replete with its paper and foodscrap littered floor, one had to just sit and wait patiently in the hope a bus from the Phnom Penh would arrive sometime in the 'not-too-distant-future'. There is a saying that in Vietnam the people plant rice. In Cambodia they just sit and watch other people's rice growing. In Laos they sit and only listen to other people's rice growing. Therefore things could have been worse. I once tried going to Laos in the early 70's. The Laotian visa clerk at the Embassy in Bangkok had only one eye. The other was covered in a misshapen and faded black patch. He smiled and said he'd give me a visa if I really wanted one, but he could not guarantee that I'd come back. I told him I'd go away and rethink my trip. I never did go to Laos then, which is probably why I'm still here to write this story now.

Normally the minibus from Phnom Penh appeared after about an hour's wait. Of course, whatever vehicle did arrive invariably sported broken-back seats and no doors or windows, these having long ago fallen out of their frames due to the very bad surface of the unmade road between the border and the Mekong ferry point. The three hour trip to the Mekong River ferry crossing was about as bad and bumpy as a dirt road could be. It reminded me for all the world about the times when I crossed the notorious Nullarbor Plain in Australia via a rutted limestone track in the early 70's. I've done the Nullarbor Plain trip a few times, once even hitch hiking across. Another time my companions and I had a big crash just after we'd crossed into Western Australia from South Australia. We rolled our car for numerous times down an embankment and caught fire. At the time of the crash, caused by a defective tyre that had been destroyed after travelling along the rutted limestone road for a thousand kilometres, I was dozing in the back seat of the white Triumph 2000. It woke me up. I may one day have to tell that story too sometime.

Back in Cambodia a decade later, reaching the Mekong River ferry stop at the end of about four hours of bone-shaking ride on the dirt road (these days it takes less than half that time on a foreign aid-funded tarred road) was like arriving at a place akin to Dante's Inferno. The chaos and cacophony of noise, mixed with the heat, dust, and desperate humanity one encountered was overpowering. People were trying to sell you everything ranging from pieces of dusty fruit, to fried spiders, to younger sisters. It was at this same ferry crossing years later an engineer working at one of my client's companies met his untimely

One of the Many Child Petrol Sniffers in the Areas Surrounding the Location of Sophie's Bar

end. The ferry had just left the dock. He rushed to try to jump aboard but caught his sandal on a rock. He fell into the water immediately to the rear of the departing ferry and consequently was chopped to pieces by the ferry's propeller blades. Later some of his work colleagues and I visited his grieving parents in their humble Mekong Delta village. Nobody must ever tell me that Vietnamese don't feel a family loss any less than we Westerners.

After finally struggling across the Mekong via the rusty old ferry packed with stinking humanity all talking at the tops of their voices, old Czech and East German manufactured trucks, and dozens of motorbikes in various stages of dilapidation, there was yet another two hours' travel to go before reaching Phnom Penh; but at least this journey was made on a tarred road of sorts replete with trucks heavily laden with both people and produce. In any event it was heaven compared to what I had just experienced. As an aside when thinking about the heavily laden vehicles, once I was in Prague at the time when Czechoslovakia still existed as a sovereign entity. I was buying cheap Czechoslovakian equipment and vehicles for our aquaculture projects located throughout the Mekong Delta and as far up the coast as Da Nang. I recall a truck salesmen from one of the big Government companies in Prague (in the late 80's there were no private companies) telling me never to buy a long-wheel based truck to use in IndoChina. He said it was because the locals piled so much onto the trucks they invariably broke the backs of those with the long wheel bases!

Skulls of Victims of the Pol Pot Regime

However, I wondered if the Czechoslovaks were better organised than the locals in IndoChina. Their baggage handlers managed to send my suitcase onto Bulgaria so for that cold week in Prague before Christmas all I had to wear when I arrived was what I put on when I left the summer heat of Western Australia. I went to try to buy some new clothes, but there were no consumer products available at a time of the imminent collapse of the Soviet Bloc. I somehow ended up at one of those vastly inefficient huge State-owned enterprises that produced and sold, of all things, only tuxedoes. I bought a couple for USD25 each and wore these during my entire stay in Prague to help ward off the biting cold. The surprising thing was, no one in Prague even blinked and eye when I rolled up to various purchasing meetings looking like an absolute toff in a tuxedo. Now how weird is that? Maybe they'd factored in that I was from Australia. And while I'm on the subject of how Prague was in those days, I should mention that I had to stay in one of those special 'luxury' hotels specially

reserved for foreign visitors who had to pay in US dollars. However the carpet was really cheap; it comprised so much nylon one almost got electrocuted when walking from one's room to the lift from all the static electricity one picked up if wearing leather shoes. I remember entering the lift and moving my index figure to push the lift button to descend. A huge spark like a mini lightning bolt shot out from the tip of my figure and turned on all the lift buttons at the one time!

Author at the Killing Fields in Cambodia

Back in Cambodia, a dirt road similar to the one leading to the ferry crossing linked Phnom Penh to the Killing Fields, which I shall describe shortly. First I want to continue on about my visit to Tuoi Sleng. As previously mentioned, Tuoi Sleng was originally a high school that had been turned into a death camp. One could hardly imagine a more bizarre transformation. In those days, many of the skulls of victims used to lie scattered around the place in the various torture rooms. I remember on one of my early visits to Tuoi Sleng I was accompanied by another irreverent Australian, Big Geoff. Big Geoff and I, being avid rugby fans, and the only visitors at that time, since visitors to Tuoi Sleng were quite rare in those early days, decided we'd amuse ourselves by playing 'passing-the-skull' rugby. How twisted was that? Maybe it was now I look back at it. However, you had to do something, anything, in order to keep sane in a place like Tuoi Sleng. I wonder if

Tuoi Sleng was originally a high school that had been turned into a death camp.

Death Pits at the Killing Fields in Cambodia

this is why so many Vietnamese have the habit of smiling when in a bad situation. Culture is a strange thing, so it's obviously important to try to understand the cultures of the places you are living in. The catch is that it's often easier said than done.

When going to Tuoi Sleng these days one will see that it has changed substantially. Things have a tendency to change, even in a place like Cambodia. For a start, the loose skulls have all disappeared. They can now be seen stacked neatly in macabre piles in a huge glass and concrete memorial at the Killing Fields itself, about 20 minutes away by car. Without the benefit of a tactile approach, the whole new Tuoi Sleng scenario just doesn't have the same impact on me that it once did. The Killing Fields' environment has also changed a great deal. Gone is the twisting, rutty dirt road you used to have to travel while sitting on the back of a motorbike taxi and enduring the stink of a driver who invariably smelled like a wet dog. If he was over fifty he could even have been one of the many untried killers who were so active in the Killing Fields not so very long ago. No wonder these drivers knew the way so well! Who else over 50 would have survived those murderous days that saw the deaths of millions other than active member of the Khmer Rouge?

New Memorial to the Victims of the Pot Pot Genocide

Nowadays there is a main highway leading directly from the City to the Killing Fields. And although there are still the various holes scattered around in the ground bearing the remnants of clothing of so many of the victims, the site, just one of the many similar killing fields scattered throughout Cambodia, now also features that large stone and glass memorial I've mentioned, along with the inescapable tourist shops. These shops remind me of when I once made the mistake of visiting Bethlehem in Israel on Christmas Eve and had to contend with all the shouting and pushing Arab and Jewish money changers and food merchants. I thought Jesus had evicted all these yobbos long ago. Looking back to the past days of the Killing Fields, I preferred things the way they used to be with their air of sinister, yet sacred sadness.

Something akin to a mini killing fields occurred once in Phnom Penh a few years after my first visit there when a Viet Kieu met up with an Australian from Bangkok who had swindled him out of about USD300,000. The Viet Kieu had a friend who was an airline pilot who used to fly to Moscow in Russia regularly. While there on behalf of the Viet Kieu, the pilot contracted an ex Russian special forces lieutenant to come to Phnom Penh to 'persuade' the fraudster to repay the money. This was unknown to me when the Viet Kieu invited me to attend a business meeting to assist him deal with an overdue debt. The meeting soon became interesting when, much to my surprise, in walked the huge special forces man who immediately started beating the fraudster to a pulp with a baton. The beating then turned to branding him several times with a hot iron, pulling out his teeth with pliers, whipping him with a thick rope, breaking his fingers with a hammer (unlike me years earlier with the money scammer in Saigon, the special forces guy had no qualms at all about using a hammer to achieve his ends), and finally sticking live electric wires in the fraudster's anus. Well, all I can say now is that it's luckily the fraudster was solidly built! That man owes his life to the fact that I was inadvertently at such a meeting and finally managed to stop the proceedings. How lucky can

you get? Ha ha, I guess it's all relative. I felt no sympathy for the fraudster, of course, because there were far too many of his type gadding about IndoChina in those days. However, there was no way I wanted to have to explain being at a business meeting where some dude had just died! It would have done nothing for my reputation.

Like the original versions of the Killing Fields and the Toui Sleng Prison, to me, Sophie's Bar while it existed, was also iconic to Phnom Penh. It was a 'must see' for hardened adventurers, although few, other than hopelessly weird people like me ever knew about the existence of Sophie's Bar. That's what made a trip there so very intriguing and anticipatory. Going there always made one feel like a naughty boy doing what he knew he should not be doing. A trip to Sophie's Bar was positively thrilling. There were lots of other seedy bars at that time in Phnom Penh, of course, such as the infamous 'Secret Bar' or even the 'Harkoolah Bar'. (This was the Cambodian way of saying 'The 'Heart of Darkness' of Joseph Conrad, Phillip Marlowe and the Congo River fame. This bar was the Cambodia equivalent of the infamous hooker bar in Saigon called 'Apocalypse Now' that operates even to this day in District 1 – but never try to take any photographs there!) Before entering the Harkoolah Bar you were always searched for knives and grenades, all this at a time well before terrorist searches were in vogue. However, what was the Congo River when compared to the mighty Mekong? And what was the Harkoolah Bar when compared to the exquisite mysteries and adventures one encountered during a sojourn at Sophie's Bar?

To enter Sophie's Bar one first had to climb two flights of incredibly filthy stairs. These reminded me of the carpet in the public bar of the old George Hotel in Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. What a depraved joint that was. Do I have some tales to tell of my experiences in that inglorious place! It was the original home of the famous St George Hotel shit fighters, literally! There were even experienced specialist players for the 'layers' and 'throwers'. However, all those stories will have to wait for another time and another place. If you survived the stairs leading up to Sophie's Bar and reached the top landing, you came into a dimly lit interior corridor that offered an unpainted door through which you passed to enter the Bar.

Originally the Bar must have been a third floor apartment in the days before Pol Pot and his murderous Khmer Rouge forced the evacuation of the entire city into the country and

Author Outside Sophie's Bar in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Sophie's Bar in Phnom Penh

Unlike most places along the Mekong at that time, Sophie's Bar always served cold beer, an essential requirement for Australian visitors like Big Geoff and me.

restarted the date back to the Year Zero. When entering Sophie's Bar, the first move was always to sit on one of the very tall rickety bamboo stools situated along the front of the counter and order a beer from the ever smiling Mama San. Mama San had only one front tooth and a bright red scar down the left side of her nose. She was a faded beauty who had definitely seen better days. Unlike most places along the Mekong at that time, Sophie's Bar always served cold beer, an essential requirement for Australian visitors like Big Geoff and me. We hated to endure ice in our beer! During my different visits I saw one or two inebriated patrons come to severe grief falling off the high stools after having too many of those lovely cold beers. It was a hazard one had to contend with.

The immediate reward for your stool climbing feat was for at least two of the dozen or so hostesses lounging in chairs around the smallish room fighting for your attention and eventual custom, to come to see if little Johnny wanted to come out to play. They found from long experience that the best way to do this was to squat down, unzip your fly, and give you some very personal attention in full view of anyone curious enough to show interest. Few did. In this respect, Sophie's Bar reminded me a little of my many visits into the 'original' and infamous U2 Bar in Saigon. It was always a good joint to take fascinated Western business tourists on guided tours of the red light hangouts. Saigon boasts three different types of bars: drinking bars like the Ice Blue, mainly havens for long-term expats to meet each other and play darts; girly bars for the tourists, such as 'Smilies'; and hardline hooker bars for the so-inclined. The U2 was definitely in the latter category. However, compared to Sophie's Bar trust me when I say that even the hooker bars like the U2 in Saigon paled into insignificance.

Local Cop in Phnom Penh in Better Days

Once when on the way to Sophie's Bar one dark and rainy night, I was approached by an elderly 'Xe Om' man (motorbike taxi rider) who asked if I wanted to buy a young virgin aged below twelve years. When I looked surprised, mistaking my meaning, the tout quickly apologised about the high asking price of USD40. I politely informed him (because who knows how many people he may have killed in the genocide) that I preferred more mature women. He just smirked at me showing the space where his missing front teeth used to be, no doubt thinking I was nothing but a 'cheap charlie', before going on his way to look for the sort of rich tourist who came to places like Cambodia in those days for such indulgences. To him it was a numbers game and just another day at the office.

Things have improved a lot since those early days in Cambodia, depending on one's perspective of course. For instance, Sophie's Bar has long been closed down. It used to get increased attention from the police as time passed and

political correctness raised its ugly head. On one of my visits one of the bar girls once asked if I'd join her in the back room, but added that if anything was done it had to be done standing up because the police had recently seized all the beds! Ha, ha...talk about being good at improvising! Like all the peoples of IndoChina, the girls at Sophie's Bar were masters at this game.

In the not too distant past there was something definitely sinister in the atmosphere in Cambodian cities like Phnom Penh, with their mostly dirt roads and complete absence of street lighting that one didn't experience in the much more controlled society of Vietnam. For a start, instead of the 'rock solid' one party Communist system one found in Vietnam, the political situation in Cambodia was still unstable, with a number of rival political parties continually angling for power. There was also the matter of the palpable tension among the large expatriate Vietnamese community in Cambodia. There still is some tension, but since Cambodia joined ASEAN it seems to have declined, with the Cambodians instead focusing their rage on Thailand's claim to some disputed temple sites on its western border.

In past days at any moment the Cambodian majority could have risen up and massacred the Vietnamese minority as it had tried to do prior to the Vietnamese invasion to remove the hated Pol Pot regime in the late 1970's. Furthermore, one should never forget there are hundreds of Cambodians in their late 50's and early 60's walking around today who have probably personally killed dozens or more innocent people with clubs and machetes. At the time of writing this story, only one or two people, including the so-called 'Comrade Duc', have been brought to trial and punished for the murder of millions of people. Where are the rest of the murderers? Well, I can tell you: they are all out there working as your 'friendly' motorbike taxi driver, or as the smiling street mechanic, or maybe even as one of the guides at Tuoi Sleng itself. Creepy stuff, huh?

Of course, time changes many things, and life these days is much better and safer in Cambodia for all concerned. However, sometimes our memories of things past recall some special times and events that we shall never see or experience again. My many trips to Sophie's Bar, along with my trips up and down the mighty Mekong River from Saigon to Phnom Penh, and even up to Siem Reip, are among such memories.

'Lest We Forget!

Can I Post a Letter Here? Or Maybe Get a Massage?

In the not too distant past there was something definitely sinister in the atmosphere in Cambodian cities like Phnom Penh, with their mostly dirt roads and complete absence of street lighting that one didn't experience in the much more controlled society of Vietnam.

The Butterfly

The painted boat floated down the mighty Mekong River.
And like a butterfly that paused to sniff the fragrant air
A slender girl with a conical hat who made me all aquiver,
Fluttered gently past so blithe, and innocently unaware.
Did such beauty really come from a worthless lump of clay?
And are there so many varieties of that common type of soil?
Is that why some of us are male and others happen to be gay?
Why some have a life of easy play and others only of toil?
I crossed the bridge and stared out over the other rail
At the delicate form who leaned against her pontoon pole
Like some diligent ant to move her boat without a sail
And wondered how years of this would take their toll.
When life can be so hard why were some made so weak?
Were there limits to the kind of clays that lay around?
Was seven days enough or were short cuts made, so to speak?
Did He run out of time and only use what could be found?
But as that lovely painted boat drifted still further away
I saw the punting work was finished on that breathless day.
The ant became a butterfly again as across the stern she lay
And I was truly grateful for the different types of clay.

Last Man Standing

If the 90's were nasty recession years, the 50's were fabulous, or so I'm told. I was born in the very auspicious year of 1951. The Fifties decade was a time of rebirth and revival after World War II. It was still a period of Australian isolation and innocence, yet it marked the true awakening of the American commercial empire. The brash new America that arose at the end of the War had its own special effect on me, if only by way of its Superman comics. The sweeping popularity of Superman during the Fifties decade epitomised all that America would eventually become: all powerful, and even benevolent (in its own way). However, like America's, Superman's virtues came with potentially fatal weaknesses. Like naive children, Americans wondered why so many people hated them, for all their grand benevolence. They came to fear attacks on their homeland. In Superman's case, he feared attacks *from* his homeland, manifest in the form of deadly Kryptonite.

There was one particular feature that occasionally appeared in the Superman comics that I particularly enjoyed: Bizarro World. As a child I used to sit and ponder about how a place like Bizarro World could possibly exist. It has been many years since I read one of the 1950's black and white version Superman comics, but I can still recall that Bizarro World existed in a parallel dimension to the real world that we all know as home. Bizarro World consisted of a square planet, where everything and everyone was zany. The people were flawed in their features in that they didn't resemble the white Anglo Saxons who were then, and still are, the elite ethnic group in both the American and Australian societies.

Bizarro World people lived in half built houses and drove broken down old cars along streets full of potholes and garbage. Nothing seemed straight or level in their environment; there were no real rules of behaviour. I never saw any depiction of creature comforts in Bizarro World, yet everyone was perfectly content and happy with their lives. Surely this place was purely the figment of some comic book writer's vivid imagination. Well, at least that's what I thought until I again returned to the real Bizarro World of the Mekong Delta, where many of the houses, especially those close to the River, tilted at all sorts of angles due to inadequate foundations being laid onto the marshy ground. The people seemed to live chaotic lives amid a shambles of disorganisation and a total lack of maintenance, yet seemed happy and content with their lot. In a recent survey I read that Vietnam had

Author's Abode on the Famous Dong Khoi Street for 6 Years in More Recent Times. 6 Floors Up, No Lift. A Hooker Bar was on the Ground Floor. Note the Old Sign for 'Star Corporate Vietnam'. This is the Author's Corporate Services Company that He Originally Operated from His Bedroom.

The Fifties decade was a time of rebirth and revival after World War II.

been voted the second happiest place on the planet after Costa Rica. The USA came in at 157. As usual Australia didn't even rate a mention; people rarely looking into the southern hemisphere when it comes to surveys and such. Yes, in the Mekong Delta I had indeed discovered the real Bizarro World.

Once when my contractor, Fatman of the Saigon money changing fame, was travelling on business on his way from Perth to Japan in 1988, he happened to be reading *'The Weekend Australian'* newspaper. In it he noticed an article written by a journalist who was following up a story about the Vietnamese boat people. At that time of its economic gloom, you may recall that thousands of people were trying to flee from Vietnam, many of them Chinese Vietnamese. In the article, Fatman noticed the name of a man we both knew as 'Mr Thanh. We'd first met Mr Thanh earlier in the Bizarro World of the Mekong Delta many months earlier. According to the newspaper account, Mr Thanh was now a chief in the huge Vietnamese boat people refugee camp at Sungi Besi in Malaysia.

Typical Outer Suburb Saigon Street Scene in 2006

Once in our early days of exploring the Mekong Delta region, Fatman and I had been conducting a reconnaissance down by the Cambodian border in and around the town of Long Xuyen, where we spent a lot of our time in those early days following Vietnam reopening its doors to foreigners like us. We were walking along the crowded street feeling a bit conspicuous since we were perhaps the only Westerners some locals had ever seen. Fatman for obvious reasons drew particular scrutiny from the universally underfed locals. All of a sudden, up fronts this skinny guy of about forty who says to us: 'G'day mates'. We both nearly fell over in surprise on hearing this so unexpected and such an Australian greeting for that time. The owner of the voice was Mr Thanh, a computer specialist who had trained in Australia in the late 60's under the Colombo Plan. On visiting relatives in Vietnam just prior to the end of the War in 1975, he had been trapped there in the Mekong Delta. Now he was being held against his will, with his wife and two children, as the resident computer expert in the region. The irony was that all he had to work with was a broken down old AT computer that could barely handle the original pac-man computer game. Older people may recall this game had one little head with teeth chasing another little head with teeth across the black and white or sometimes green computer screen trying to eat it.

Mr Thanh told us that he had already tried to escape back to Australia twice with his family. The first time they had almost made it to the Cambodian border before being caught and brought back in chains. The second time their attempt ended in a total tragedy. The family had tried escaping by a boat that had overturned. Both Mr Thanh's young children were drowned that night.

Mr Thanh was an intelligent man, as are many Vietnamese when it suits them to be. When it doesn't, well my desk can be brighter. Mr Thanh's story melted our hearts; however, at the time there was little we could do for him. Neither Fatman nor I forgot about our meeting with this courageous man. Imagine our surprise and elation, then, to learn from the article that the determined Mr Thanh and his lovely wife had at last escaped from their Delta prison and were now held as prisoners in Malaysia. I hastened to the rescue. I arrived at the refugee camp on my way to Vietnam a short while later. Initially I was denied access to any persons within by the Malaysian military entrusted with securing the camp. However, like Mr Thanh, I was determined to ensure the repatriation of both himself and his wife to Australia. I had to try again later.

'Club Girls' on Dong Khoi Street at Entrance to Author's Building

On my way back to Australia from Ho Chi Minh City, I again called in at the camp. Because of my military history, I was able to persuade the camp commandant, a major in the Royal Malaysian Regiment, to allow me access to Mr Thanh. Naturally, Thanh was overjoyed to see me. After I had failed to gain access to him the first time, he had all but lost hope of ever being rescued. He thought he was going to be sent back to face punishment in Vietnam like so many of the other refuges. There were literally thousands of refugees in camps across Asia at that time, some of whom, like my later to be personal assistant, Ms Ngan, had fled to Hong Kong. Ms Ngan had been imprisoned for 7 years in her camp under atrocious conditions only to be eventually sent back to Vietnam. I hear even in this new century that she's still doing it tough trying to survive the GFC in Ohio by painting other women's nails while supporting her son born in the refugee camp. I hope God helps her.

After my meeting at the camp with Thanh, I went direct to the Australian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Luckily I met a man whose name unfortunately I do not now recall, but he was an angel in disguise. I remember him as the only person I had ever met in the employ of an Australian Embassy or Consulate anywhere in the world who wished to enthusiastically and efficiently help a fellow citizen. The end result was that Fatman and I got to sponsor Mr Thanh and his wife into Australia within a period of only three months. They are now happily settled in Geelong, Victoria (the place of birth of my youngest son), where the last I heard Mr Thanh was the head of the computer section of the Ford Motor Company.

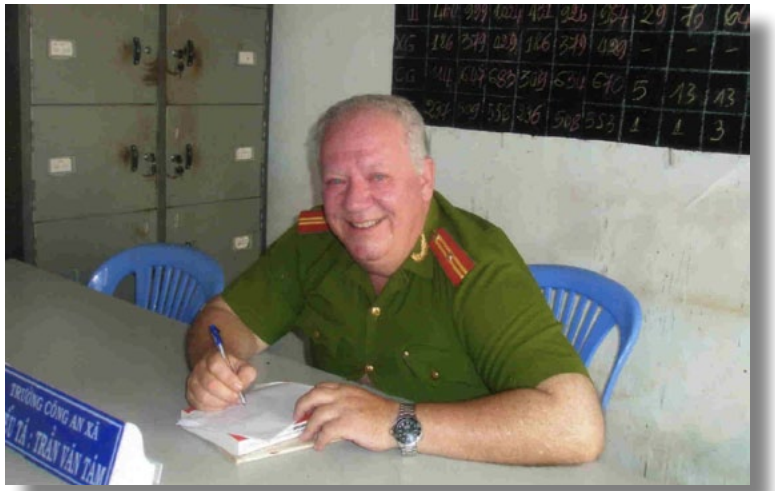
Mr Thanh's story melted our hearts; however, at the time there was little we could do for him.

Last Man Standing

The 5 per centers was what our group of isolated expats called ourselves in the days before Vietnam and Cambodia became popular investment destinations packed with all sorts of newbie ringins.

Many years later it was also in the Mekong Delta town of Long Xuyen that I met a new friend, an American from Massachusetts, simply and affectionately known to all as 'Ong Map', meaning Fat Man. It was a case of history, to some extent, repeating itself since he resembled so closely my earlier friend 'Fatman'. Ong Map loved his food which, not surprisingly, was always his favourite topic of conversation, and it showed. I have never known another who could speak with such passion about the delights of a barbequed spare rib. Ong Map was a Vietnam veteran who, like some of his colleagues, had returned to do business and live most of his time in Vietnam. He was about 57 when I first met him. He may only have had a junior high school education, but Ong Map was a crafty piece of work; he was living proof that you didn't need a college education to get along in life and survive in Saigon, in those days at least. It wouldn't do now, of course.

If ever there was a place for pussy it was Saigon. As they said in the cult movie, *'From Dusk Till Dawn'*, there was hot pussy, cold pussy, shaved pussy, hairy pussy, young pussy, old pussy, clean pussy, dirty pussy, smelly pussy, soft pussy, hard pussy, healthy pussy and, unfortunately, sick pussy. You had to watch out, especially if you took to hanging out at the seedy 'Apocalypse Now' disco as so many of the '5 per centers' did for want of anything more constructive to do with their time. The 5 per centers was what our group of isolated expats called ourselves in the days before Vietnam and Cambodia became popular investment destinations packed with all sorts of newbie ringins. Members of our 'club' included the likes of 'Singapore Geoff, Big Geoff, Popcorn Geoff, Canadian Marc, Handsome Raul the Spaniard, Reckless Richie, Badboy Mike, Postman Eddie, Big Ed, Jewish Alan, Rotund Roland, the Cardinal and, of course, yours truly, together with a mixed bag of others and the general hangers on, such as the Dragon Lady, and Belgian Marco, to name only a few.



Ong Map Wearing a Vietnamese Police Uniform for a Joke. Not the Smoothest Man in Town, He Still Had 5 Wives at One Time or Another

The 'Cardinal', was a particular favourite of mine, although he never really took to me. Maybe it was because I used to tease him about the Pope, whom I had met once years back when visiting the Vatican (Pius VI). The Cardinal was a middle aged Irish Catholic American lawyer from New York who now lived in Saigon. He'd worked for Tricky Dicky Nixon's law firm he once told me with pride. In 1962 the Cardinal had been a US military advisor to the Vietnamese Army at the tender age of twenty. The Cardinal loved to drink wine at Sheridan's Irish Bar and eat at the Skewer's restaurant across the street from the Wild Horse Saloon. Sometimes we'd meet up at the famous Magambo Mini Hotel in its original location on Thi Sach Street run by the popular Mike (now deceased) and 'Lanni'. Big Geoff and I had previously shared many a magnificent breakfast at Magambos when we were still good mates. It was before I knew he had a long history of fraud. I really miss those breakfasts, our lively discussions, and our past mateship.

The Cardinal, however, was much more guarded in what he said. No matter how close we got, I could never persuade him to confess for how long, or how many times before, he'd been married. Being a lawyer, the Cardinal couldn't help at times being a complex and calculating man. But during those years he was my good and trusted friend and the author of two books on Vietnam, *'Lost in Translation'* and *'Vietnam, Full Circle'*. To this day I am unclear if he ever got to finally publish the latter. Probably not since he was a rather poor writer, which was a matter of some frustration to him. He could never come to accept that his first book about the time he served as a military advisor was published due to its historical value rather than any sort of literary merit.

The Cardinal was so called because he was an avid church goer and donator to church charities. He often liked to hang out with the local nuns, no doubt vainly hoping their holiness would somehow rub off onto him. It's the simple way a lot of us 5 per centers used to think in those days. I recall the Cardinal, who was very wealthy like his Pope, partly because he hated to shout beers for his mates, donated to a local Catholic charity called 'Street Kids'. He then made sure everyone knew this by having a big picture taken for the event with him right in the middle wearing his most garish red and white Hawaiian shirt that clashed so badly with his bright pink skin. The Cardinal didn't exactly follow the true spirit of Catholic religious teachings. (Some would have called him a downright hypocrite.) Instead he lived in sin with another much younger woman while still married back in the US. Subsequently he had his second lot of kids from this woman baptised in the Catholic Church. Good one Cardinal! Some said his kids, lovely twins, were born from artificial means conceived totally against Catholic Church doctrine. No one knew for sure or cared. It wasn't anyone else's business; it's just that the Cardinal's constant religious hypocrisy did get to us at times. It's about the only thing we never really liked about him (we chose to overlook his lawyer past). Some time ago the Cardinal returned to the US and finally divorced his wife who still lived there. We all wished him well.

All 5 per centers had secrets of some kind, but no one really cared. We just loved each other's company and looked out for one another. We had to. They were tough times and no one else would. It was a good feeling to be among so many 'friends' in Saigon. Sometimes I wondered if all the 5 per centers were really friends, or merely a band of expats drawn together at that particular period in the history of Vietnam in their bid to survive in a totally alien culture. The answer to that weighty question is that in life 'you pay your money and you take your chances'. Saigon was a wild place and all too often it proved to be a case of every man for himself.

Collectively, the 5 per centers were people who were clearly very different from the ninety five percent of the population you would normally meet in Western societies in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, or the United States. This didn't necessarily make them in any way superior as human beings to the 95 per centers who comprised the rest of the population of Western countries, but for me it was a question of 'horses for courses'. I both loved and hated the expats in my Bizarro World because like me, they also seemed to fit into this crazy, mixed up, twisted world of semi fantasy. As for the Vietnamese, they were nearly all naturally native Bizarro World inhabitants, so the 95 per centers among the Vietnamese people were akin to the 5 per center expats; that's probably why I grew to love the Vietnamese people so much too.

When examining why I considered the average Vietnamese to be a true inhabitant of Bizarro World, you only have to look for a moment at what he chose to eat at his local cafe.

All 5 per centers had secrets of some kind, but no one really cared.

MFO Logo

If you glanced at the menu you would see such gems as 'Pork leg cooked like dog food', 'Steamed weasel', 'Living wild pig', 'Sparrow Soup', 'Fish bladder soup', 'Wild beast organs with vegetables', 'Wild beast sexual organs', 'Chicken torn to pieces' (meaning chicken in a basket!) and 'Small pieces of snake fried in garlic'. Now if that's not a bizarre array fit for the inhabitants of any Bizarro World, I don't know what is. This was just a normal selection from the menu of an average café at that time. You should have seen the cafes that served up exotic specialities. When you are hungry enough, you will eat anything I guess. And during those hard years of the 80's there were a lot of very hungry and very desperate people around in Vietnam and Cambodia.

When it came to drinking, the 5 per centers were no slouches, especially Reckless Richie. However, I must admit none could equal the Fijian soldiers I encountered when I was an officer with the Multi National Force & Observers (MFO) in Egypt and Israel. On leave a 6' 2" tall, drunken and fit young Fijian soldier weighing in at around 95 kilos of pure muscle, was definitely a man to be reckoned with. When there was more than one, you had to look for the US Cavalry for special assistance, but not Custer's mob of course.

Fijian Members of the MFO in the Sinai, Egypt

For most of my two tours of duty with the MFO I was located in our Cairo office, but occasionally I would visit my American counterpart in Tel Aviv for a little relaxation, Israel boasting more Western style entertainment than Cairo. On one such visit I remember my colleague receiving an urgent Force Directive to assist the Israeli police apprehend three renegade Fijians allegedly smashing up the town in a drunken rampage, something many years later even professional terrorists hadn't managed to do. After breaking up a local five star hotel on the sea front, which included ejecting a colour television set from a tenth floor window into the pool below, one drunken soldier was reported to be lying unconscious in the front foyer. Another was reportedly still engaged in a fist fight with a large number of the hotel staff, while the third had escaped from the police and was 'at large' still wearing handcuffs.

A few really adventurous Fijians opted to visit Cairo, where I spent most of my time. When doing so they also usually seemed to end up in some sort of imbroglio with the local natives. At this point I should mention that while in Cairo I had taken the opportunity to brush up on my Egyptian dialect, which I came to speak passably well. A memorable incident once occurred while I was sitting peacefully in my liaison office in the suburb of Heliopolis (at that time an outer suburb of Cairo, but these days, given the fantastic population growth, a relatively inner suburb), when a breathless and frantic Egyptian burst through my door shouting at the top of his voice. It took some time to calm him down before I could make out his heavy dialect to discern he was the driver of a taxi bus that was transporting some local Egyptian labour, as well as some Fijians on leave from the MFO's north base to Cairo. Of course, the Fijians were already dead drunk and up to their usual antics.

Normally Egyptians were very likeable and friendly people. The Australian infantry colonel who headed up our national contingent when I first arrived in the MFO (and a damned good rugby union coach), managed to summarise the Egyptian national qualities succinctly in one short sentence just prior to his departing back to Australia. I'll never forget his wise words. He leaned forward conspiratorially and said to me: 'Chris, let me tell you all about the Egyptians: they're bloody nice people, but fucking useless'. After a year on duty, mostly spent in Cairo, I came to see that this hard-bitten old infantry colonel of few words was absolutely correct in his taciturn observation. Anyway, at that point of time in my small liaison office there was nothing 'nice' about the manner of this particular Egyptian driver. He wanted blood now and anyone's would do.

From the driver's story, told in broad Egyptian dialect, I was able to fathom that after he had crossed the Suez Canal with a bus load of passengers, including the Fijians, the copious quantities of duty free alcohol, easily obtained at the local PX store in the base camp that the soldiers were consuming, had began to take its effect. This was the very thing the Prophet had warned him about when enjoining all good Moslems not to touch the demon grog. No doubt the huge, drunken Fijians would have proved a terrifying sight when towering over the poor Egyptian driver; his terror had been compounded when the same Fijians decided to extract a number of large water melons from his bus' cargo bin and use them to bombard other passengers within the bus as well as the passing traffic.

In Egypt all wheeled vehicles are driven in accordance with the maxim: to slow is to falter, to brake is to fail, to stop is defeat. This mantra was never so evident as in the area of the Suez Canal, where the average taxi cab liked to hurtle along at about one hundred and fifty kilometres an hour regardless of the road conditions. It did so while containing up to ten people, and usually with a similar number of suitcases tied, one on top of the other, on the roof. Overtaking on the road that ran along the Canal under every possible circumstance seemed to be mandatory for all Egyptian cab drivers. Every vehicle had a burning desire to overtake another vehicle particularly if that vehicle had just overtaken it. And no more than twenty centimetres should be allowed between the vehicle overtaking and the one being overtaken. (This distance was cut to ten centimetres in the case of bicycles and pedestrians.)

Beret and Arm Badge

For a taxi and its occupants to have been hit by a huge flying water melon under those conditions could have been a very painful experience indeed for anything or anyone on the receiving end. To add insult to injury, apparently the Fijians had actually turned around and pissed on the driver when he ineffectually tried to constrain their potentially murderous activities. It took me a few minutes to translate the latter part of the driver's tale as I didn't know the Egyptian word for 'piss'. A short, but hilarious pantomime by the driver, eventually drove home his meaning. Trying not to burst out laughing through all this shouting and gesticulating took all my discipline, and I am truly a very disciplined man. Somehow I managed to remain serious and look sympathetic at the same time and thus I got the driver to relax a little. After his initial outbursts, this character went on to demand that I follow him out of the office and arrest the 'madmen', who were at this moment dozing in the back of his bus parked outside my office.

Australian Members of the MFO

Gently I declined the driver's suicidal request to single-handedly

My very last duty in the MFO was to go out to meet up with a group of Egyptian so-called military engineers given the job of clearing minefields along the northern border region.

try to arrest the drunken Fijians. Many times as the Duty Officer back in 4 Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, I had to stand back while drunken soldiers fighting mad were finally beaten into submission by the duty guard squad and thrown into cells to cool off for the night. In the morning they would then emerge meek and mild and be sent on their way without facing any charge of having struck an officer, a very serious offence. I remember a

Memorial to MFO Members Who Died on Duty

drunk soldier had been jailed overnight for trying to kill his mates with a machete because they wouldn't pay him USD5 for eating a live slimy green tree frog. He was sick afterwards so they said he'd lost the bet. Instead I suggested to the driver that we best let 'sleeping dogs lie' and that he continue his journey in peace while the Fijians still slept. The good fellow saw the wisdom of this advice and finally agreed to leave. He departed with my sincere wish that Allah was with him that night.

Thankfully no one had been killed by a flying water melon thrown by the drunken Fijians. It later stuck me that this would have been a somewhat ignominious way to go. I hoped the petrol voucher I gave the driver would partially compensate him for the indignity of being urinated upon by the relatives of some ancient cannibals. Underneath his anger, the driver had all the usual good graces so common among the ordinary Egyptian people, whom I really got to like, but never really understand. As I watched him drive into the sunset I mused that thus had ended yet another day in the life of a humble MFO liaison officer. And it makes me think today how very few Arabs I lived and worked with for years throughout the Middle East would match the stereotype profile of terrorists portrayed by the Western press. Whereas in contrast I thought about all the brutal repression I had witnessed firsthand carried out by Zionist zealot settlers against the Palestinian people in Israel. Something was very wrong with the world.

My very last duty in the MFO was to go out to meet up with a group of Egyptian so-called military engineers given the job of clearing minefields along the northern border region. Over the years some thousands of mines had been laid along the border and the occasional, but heavy rains of the region had washed the sand through waddies and shifted the locations of the mines to who knew where. For this reason I was always very reluctant to venture

away from well travelled roads and paths. In the south, especially, there was always some Bedouin applying for compensation because one of his camels, or worse, a member of his family, had inadvertently stepped on a land mine and suffered the dire consequences. The same occurred in North Africa around the site of El Alamein where both British and German forces laid millions of landmines to destroy the futures of the local people.

Since being in the Army I have, like all soldiers, truly hated landmines and the legacy of death they leave behind long after a war has finished. So with very mixed feelings I followed my new orders and set out to meet the mine clearers. On arrival at the rendezvous point, I was greeted outside a few torn and battered tents by a scruffy, but smiling Egyptian soldier about five feet tall. He looked like Charlie Chaplin as he had on his small feet boots of about size twelve. They were open at the toes, had no laces and flapped like flippers when he walked. This friendly individual was the victim, as so many front line soldiers are, of his country's virtually non-existent supply system. From what I witnessed while in that region of the Middle East, the Israeli Army didn't really so much win their series of local wars: the Arabs lost them.

The soldier took me to his officer, a lively enough fellow who refused to give his name or unit in case I was an Israeli spy. This character was a bit of a 'lad' because while later out on the mine clearing operations, I noticed he would have his mine clearers walk backwards and prod for mines behind instead of prodding in front of their footsteps. Maybe this was a modern Egyptian mine clearing technique! When I enquired why he followed what seemed to be this suicide procedure, he responded that the mines were probably in too deep so it didn't really matter which way his men walked. I didn't like the logic, but as I wasn't an Egyptian of higher rank there was nothing I could do. Another thing that really worried me was when he would hold old Russian made anti personnel mines in both his hands and in front of me swing them towards each other pretending to hit the top explosive release mechanisms together, but just missing doing so by millimetres.

After stomaching his 'jokes' for a while I made some lame excuse to withdraw and then fled back to report about my enjoyable day at the mine clearing to my liaison boss, a useless Australian colonel from the Signals Corps, who spent most of his time sitting in his office writing obsequious letters to generals back in Russell Offices, the equivalent of an Australian mini Pentagon in Canberra. I later heard about two weeks after returning home from my last tour of duty that the officer and seven of his unfortunate engineers had been killed while clearing the mines. They were good, simple and happy fellows, including the crazy officer, and didn't deserve this fate.

MFO Military Medal . Author Has One with a Bar for 2 Tours of Duty

Egyptian Liaison Officers. Always Great Guys.

Brothers-in-Arms always help each other, especially if they are Americans and Australians.

Strangely many years after serving in the MFO, in 1988 the Author rescued a US citizen in Hanoi who had lost all his money to a pick pocket. Those were very hard days in Hanoi to be without a cent. By sheer coincidence and luck for the American, he too, had served in the MFO when at that time very few had. Brothers-in-Arms always help each other, especially if they are Americans and Australians.

Back in Saigon, a Brit who definitely wasn't an active member of the 5 per centers, later crossed my path. He was every bit as weird as the 5 per centers, of course, otherwise he wouldn't have survived for so long in Vietnam in those early days. He reminded me of Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. Sir D, as I called him was an extremely wealthy merchant banker who was very deservedly decorated with an OBE by Her Majesty the Queen. The closest I ever came to this was when I had morning tea with Her Majesty once, but only as a 'forced volunteer' while at the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

Sir D did a lot of good for a lot of people in Vietnam so it was only right that he was a very successful collector of gold bullion. However, he was not the only one. During the late 80's, to protect their savings, most of which was ill-gotten on the thriving Vietnamese black market, and from smuggling goods down the Mekong River, through Cambodia and onto Vietnam, the rich Chinese merchants in Cho Lon (meaning 'Big Market'), were buying up gold at well above the market rate and thus an opportunity arose for a smart trader to make a quick profit. In those days Cho Lon was the sister city to Saigon. Now Cho Lon has become District 5 and together it and other lesser districts, and surrounding land and townships, now comprise the total metropolis of greater Ho Chi Minh City. In 1989 the Vietnamese Government expelled a lot of the Chinese from Cho Lon. Many of these fled the country as the so-called boat people. The Vietnamese dong currency was useless outside of Vietnam. So to take their wealth with them the Chinese boat people needed gold, and they had the money to pay for it. This was another reason for the big demand for gold at that time in Vietnam.

Seeing an opportunity for a quick buck, I had our seafood company borrow a million dollars in Perth at the then extortionate interest rate of nineteen per cent. With this I bought gold bullion from Hong Kong and Perth in the special 'tael' sizes required by the Chinese merchants in Vietnam. The Hong Kong purchase went smoothly, but the Australian side of the supply proved to be the biggest headache with all the usual bureaucracy and red tape that increasingly seems to surround any sort of entrepreneurial business activity in Australia. I miraculously managed to insure this gold for transit to Vietnam, via Thailand, and get a Vietnamese gold import permit when 'grey men' middle managers of big companies like Mayne Nickles said it was all too hard. On arrival at Bangkok, I declared the gold to the staff at the security transit site at Bangkok Airport and secured it for the night. I still had to get my visa to Vietnam! The staff was too surprised and impressed to consider objecting. Anyway even if they had objected a USD20 bribe to the counter man ensured all would go smoothly, and I'm happy to say that it did.

I retrieved my gold the next day and with the wheels on my trolley buckling with the weight of 100 kilos of gold (in those days suitcases didn't yet have the wheels built into them) I boarded the Air France plane. The gold sat right next to me on a first class seat with Air France. One could do things like that in those days. We then flew, on a clear and sunny day off to Vietnam, eventually landing into the chaos of the old Ho Chi Minh City airport terminal. On arrival I sold all the gold to the contacts who met me in the airport itself on the agreed fourteen days' credit and made a hundred and ten thousand dollars net profit in the one

day. But in fact I wasn't actually paid the hard cash until twenty eight days had passed while still paying my bank nineteen per cent interest on a million dollars during the wait. Who in Asia pays on time? A million dollars overdue at nineteen per cent interest was not a small concern. However, I finally managed to get paid and achieved what few others would have even dreamed about doing in those days of the initial opening up of the country. That was how business was done in Vietnam in those heady times. It's amazing what effect a gold bar can have in your hand when you want to push business through. Business is about brains, balls and bullshit. If you haven't got all three requirements attributes, and you aren't firing on all six cylinders, don't try trading gold into Vietnam.

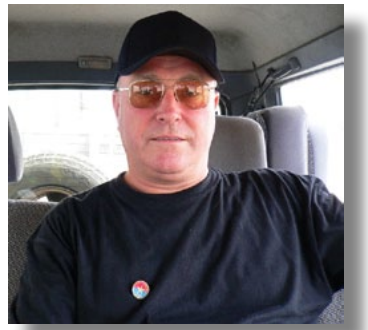
Postscript: And What Became of the 5 Per Centers, Who Were So Bright-Eyed and Bushy Tailed in the Years 1988-2007?

Time brings change. What has happened in Vietnam since January 1988 shows this saying to be true. Despite making new friends and being a member of new social organizations like InterNations, in 2012 I now sometimes feel a little isolated being the 'last man standing' out of the old 5 per centers and their associates who used to inhabit Saigon with all their wild and wonderful ways.

Recently I paid a visit to the old group 'hangout' of the 5 per centers at the Wild Horse Saloon on Thai Van Lung Street in District 1, Saigon. I passed by the overpriced Skewers Restaurant that is still run by that greasy Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) that I never liked. Skewers and the Wild Horse Saloon are now the only remaining business out of all the original ones that used to ply their trade in this busy little street. Most of the hospitality businesses existing today are currently owned by local or overseas Vietnamese and cater mainly to Japanese and Korean clients, along with the wealthier Vietnamese, who are rapidly growing in numbers. The Westerner bars long ago moved over to new locations further to the south west of District 1, where they now cluster around Pasteur Street.

Wild Horse Saloon

I paused after I'd walked through the bat wing doors that marked the entrance to the Wild Horse Saloon and looked in. I saw only Vietnamese, Japanese and Koreans customers inside. It was a very different sight to the old days. Gone was the row of hats on the wall. No more was there a bell near the door to be rung when someone was going to 'shout' the house with drinks. The lucky horseshoe had disappeared too. All of a sudden a strange white mist appeared before my eyes and then disappeared just as quickly. I now saw everything inside so clearly. Over in the corner I saw Scottish Tom and his sidekick, Marcus, sitting together as always. With them was our friend Ms Ngan who had worked for me in Norco Tiles and who has since left to seek a new life in Ohio. Ms Ngan was the author's much missed 'Wife No 2', although she hated to be called this. Tom was clutching a vodka and tonic, his favourite drink. He looked up and smiled at me and gave a small wave: we were always good friends. I remembered that smile so well even though Tom was long ago killed on his motorbike while driving to his job at Norco Tiles


Scottish Tom Gone but Not Forgotten

Ms Ngan

We used to tease the pretty Ms Vang about whom she'd marry from among us

in Binh Duong Province, about an hour and a half from District 1. I still miss him. Tom's ratlike sidekick, Marcus, couldn't survive without Tom and soon disappeared to Thailand never to be heard of again. I don't miss him and his untrustworthy ways.

At the bar I saw Jewish Alan arguing with the Dragon Lady, something he was famous for, being a jealous sort of a guy. He always wanted it all for himself. The barmaids Phuong Anh, who had a small crush on me, and her friend, Ms Vang, continued with their work unaffected. Belgian Marco, looked on bemused. I heard that Phong Anh later went to work for a Russian restaurant before entirely disappearing from the scene. Her friend, Ms Vang, still works at the Wild Horse Saloon. We used to tease the pretty Ms Vang about whom she'd marry from among us, but she never did find a husband and so continues with her life still alone. Belgian Marco hasn't been seen for a while. A few years back he lost his job, but said he was confident of finding another, even in these hard times. Jewish Alan remains rich and continues to travel a lot, now spending most of his time in China and Indonesia. His two dumb 'slaves', Tennessee Mark and Postman Eddie, have also disappeared, thankfully. Tennessee Mark almost died of alcoholic poisoning and was rushed to hospital where he was put on life support. He eventually recovered, but lost his job and had to return home. Postman Eddie, so called because he served in the American War as a postal officer, got himself beaten up by a female with a bottle immediately outside the doors of the Saloon. He hasn't been seen for years now that Jewish Alan, who used to do his thinking for him, is not here to order him around. The Dragon Lady married some expat no one had ever met. She now lives somewhere overseas I hear.

The Infamous 'Apocalypse Now Disco in More Recent Times.

Nearby I saw Reckless Richie, the young Welsh teacher who thought he knew everything, but actually knew a lot less, pontificating to no one in particular. He'd been drinking hard, as usual, so no one was interested, not even Canadian Marc who sat next to him and who had shared so many of Reckless Ritche's adventures with the local ladies. Reckless Richie became an alcoholic for a while, but I recently heard from our mutual friend, Bad Boy Mike, that he was now surviving somewhere in China. Canadian Marc proved to be steadier. He married a lovely local girl and now fathered a child of whom he is as proud as he can be. He had a huge and memorable wedding in Saigon. Reckless Richie was there, but he was so drunk I doubt if he remembered the experience. Bad Boy Mike took on enormous proportions due to the frustrations stemming from constantly having to

Author at Canadian Marc's Wedding – (Canadian Marc Looking Like Butter Wouldn't Melt in His Mouth.)

find jobs in the hospitality industry only to lose them just as fast as he found them. He's now in some hole of a town in some distant province of Vietnam where the costs are very low just trying to survive. At one time Bad Boy Mike used to teach English, even though he could hardly read or write himself. Anything was possible in those days. As a favour I corrected all his students' papers. Bad Boy got the job in the first place by forging Reckless Ritchie's teaching degree, a forgery he still uses to this day when searching for a new job. Eventually he lost that teaching job too. I helped him get another good job in the Middle East, but guess what? He lost that one too and ended up back in his provincial hell hole somewhere in Central Vietnam.

I looked to the left. I saw yet another alcoholic misfit, the decrepit Mr Kent no less. He was wearing his trademark baseball cap and black leather waistcoat and was hunched over the Jameson whiskey that eventually killed him. In his jeans pocket was his trusty blackjack that he still carried even though he was about 66 years old. Now his ashes float around in the East China Sea off Vung Tau. No one misses that fraudster, who helped steal millions from Ong Map and his American partner, Fast Ed.

Ong Map the 'Big Man from Massachusetts' I noted was sitting in the middle of the room before a huge steak surrounded by his usual entourage of cheap Vietnamese women, whom he always hosted. Ong Map had been married 4 times up until then. This was possible in those days when costs were low and many Vietnamese women were desperate for financial support. All looked for a foreigner to provide an escape from the economic misery so manifest in their lives at that time. Ong Map was dead crafty, but was never the sharpest tack in the pack. He managed to lose all Fast Ed's money in a failed aquaculture investment engineered by a female American lawyer and her bagman, Mr Kent. Despite being conned like some dumb kid out of his partner's money, Ong Map, as I mentioned earlier, was a cagey enough fish about his own money, which he never liked to spend easily. When Fast Ed's money was all used up he therefore high-tailed it back to Massachusetts, taking with him Mai Lim, his 5th wife and a very pleasant nurse whom he met in the Mekong Delta Province of Tra Vinh. Ong Map always made sure his own interests were well catered for. He spent a year in Vietnam as a national serviceman in 1966 and pumped petrol for his war effort. Afterwards he falsely claimed post traumatic stress disorder and has lived off the American taxpayer ever since. Despite this rather questionable approach he also claims to be an American patriot and ensured that he had his country's flag on the wall of his bedroom so no one could say otherwise.

Well away from Ong Map under a bright light and immediately before the original bandstand sat Popcorn Jeff, a skinny American from Minnesota. Popcorn Jeff and

Back Street Off Le Thanh Ton Street Where Author Learned to Ride a Motorbike. Now Converted into a Street of Hooker Bars to Service Japanese Clients

All looked for a foreigner to provide an escape from the economic misery so manifest in their lives at that time.

They were all neighbours living in 'The Ghetto', the local term for a group of villas that used to serve as military accommodation during the American War years.

Ong Map disliked each other. Popcorn Jeff was an ex cop, who hated his job as a cop. Popcorn Jeff sold popcorn to the bars in Saigon, hence his name. He was forced by his Vietnamese wife to return to the US in order to educate their children. Popcorn Jeff's main strength was that he knew all the best USD10 blow job joints situated along Dien Bien Phu Street. He was a good guy and I really liked him, unlike his namesake, Big Geoff.

Big Geoff was initially my friend and in the early years we had many good times together in both Vietnam and Cambodia. That was until I found out that he was an Australian fraudster who had previously hung out in the US. He fled to Saigon to escape a US police net. He was friends with that other fraudster Mr Kent: as the old saying goes, 'Birds of a feather flock together'. No one I've ever known has had the 'street smarts' of the very cunning Big Geoff. Eventually he swindled his own brother and other shareholders to take control of a big manufacturing business in Binh Duong Province. Big Geoff, currently aged about 67 is now long divorced from his 17 year old wife. He still lives somewhere in District 1 with his two lovely kids, but keeps a very low profile these days. Big Geoff has many enemies, like The Shrek, an elderly English expat who so resembled that comic character. The Shrek ended up dead in the backpackers area around Thai Van Lung Street supposedly of a brain embolism, but the smart money knew otherwise.

The exact opposite in stature to Big Geoff was Singapore Geoff, a tiny little guy with a complex character made all the worse from drink. I nearly missed him sitting alone in the shadows of the Saloon. Singapore Geoff was good company until he was drunk. Then you had to watch out for his abuse to all and sundry. It's a wonder that he had survived until now due to having this penchant for truculence along with his diminutive size. Once I heard he had a close call when he was punched up at Magambo's when it used to be in its original location on Thi Sach Street, just around the corner from the Wild Horse Saloon. I heard Mr Kent did his only good deed in Saigon by whacking a few of Singapore Geoff's assailants with his deadly black jack. However, I have no doubt that Singapore Geoff, who was of course drunk and at his insulting best at the time, would have deserved any hiding he may have got prior to his rescue.

Handsome Raul from Spain along with Clever English Trevor also sat at Ong Map's table. They were all neighbours living in 'The Ghetto', the local term for a group of villas that used to serve as military accommodation during the American War years. Handsome Raul and Clever Trevor were traffic light engineers responsible for developing the traffic light system that few ever bothered to obey in Saigon. Clever Trevor left for Lebanon years ago. Handsome Raul, whom we all thought was as bent as a hairpin, eventually returned to Spain, where he mysteriously fathered a daughter to the collective surprise of all the 5 per centers who heard the news. I take a moment to sniff the air in the Wild Horse Saloon and smell heavy cigar smoke, so I know Rotund Roland from Austria (not Australia) is present. One could smoke away to one's heart's content inside establishments in those days. Rotund Roland had just descended from the jazz place that used to operate above the Saloon at one time. He was a great cigar smoker and I really miss our time merrily puffing away together on big Cubans. Rotund Roland was a ring in from the World Bank who loved the good life and consequently was forever on a diet. He travelled the world as a water expert wasting the World Bank'smoney advising on totally ineffective water conservation projects in all corners of the globe, often in the same week! How he ever kept awake is beyond me. You never saw a man with a greater number of frequent flyer points. Now a

slimmer, but just as calculating Roland lives and works in The Philippines. I recently dug him out of his deep cover by getting in contact with him the other day via email. I need people like him to buy my book.

Lurking right to the back of the Saloon I glimpsed the elusive Cardinal mentioned previously in this story emerging from the entrance to the toilets still zipping up his fly. It was just in time. The gloom in the Saloon was starting to envelop him and all around him. It had started to get darker and darker inside. Could it be the shades of Hades were reaching out for him? Ah, no, it was the mist returning...Then suddenly all is clear again and the current Japanese, Korean and rich Vietnamese customers return into view. Gone forever are the 5 per centers, relegated, to their place in history; gone but not forgotten. I turned to leave, and looked across narrow Thai Van Lung Street to the small Hyundai parked on the far side. I saw waiting for me, while using one of her 3 mobile phones that ring constantly and that are the absolute bane of my life, the mysterious, magnificent, and marvellous: 'All seeing, All knowing, and All powerful' Mdm Huan.

'All seeing, All knowing, and All powerful' Mdm Huan.

Mdm Huan was everywhere and everything. I met her in January 1988 when first arriving in Vietnam. She was working as a translator for the State-owned company, Seaprodex. In those days all companies were State owned of course. Mdm Huan's father had been, until his death in the mid 90's, the Deputy Head of Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province. Prior to that he had been a Vietnamese Ambassador to a number of countries in Africa.

Some of the 5 Per Centers: Left to Right Around the Table: Bad Boy Mike, Rotund Roland, Ong Map, Postman Eddie, Ms Thuy, Ms Ngan, Author, Gigolo Kevin, Reckless Ritchie, Handsome Roooollll

Mdm Huan's father and his wife fled to the North to join Ho Chi Minh's nationalist independence cause during the time of partition following the defeat in 1954 of the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Like many in the struggle he, his wife and their children sacrificed much for the great cause of unification and independence for Vietnam. Like her 5 brothers and sisters, Mdm Huan was left behind in the South. She was brought up in the old French hill resort city of Da Lat by her auntie, where she was shot in the arm by a stray bullet while playing in the street.

Mdm Huan: Smart and Tough

Mdm Huan was a proficient real estate investor and remained married to a Vietnamese professor, who once taught in Canberra, where I myself had lived for many years while at the Royal Military College and later when serving at Army Office. She had two daughters, both of whom now worked in my company in Saigon, *Star Corporate Vietnam* I held the eldest one, Stefanie, in my arms when she was a baby. I used to tease her that I even changed her nappy, but I was just kidding. How time passes! Stefanie thought about becoming a shareholder of the company but opted for the airlines instead. Stefanie grew up in Vietnam, but attended final year high school in the US; she graduated from the Curtin University in Western Australia. Young Stefanie was a symbol of the newly emerging Vietnam, and epitomised a very different story to the hard times the Vietnamese people endured between the economy's emerging years of 1988 to 2007. Long gone are the days of skilled Vietnamese engineers and doctors trying to sell one cigarette at a time on Dong Khoi Street. A brash new Saigon is now full of skyscrapers and is plagued by high prices. It is a very far cry from the primitive place experienced by most of the 5 per centers.

The 'All Seeing, All Knowing and All Powerful' Mdm Huan

I dedicate this book to the 'All seeing, All knowing, and All powerful' Mdm Huan. I do so with thanks for all her help, loyalty, and support over the years covered in this book. She has been the Alpha and Omega of my life in Vietnam, so it's only fitting that my book both starts and ends with a final mention of my close and generous Vietnamese friend. I was the first man standing in January 1988, when Vietnam first opened its doors to foreigners like me. Maybe because of the 'All seeing, All knowing and All powerful' Mdm Huan, out of all the 5 per centers, I now remain the last man standing to record for posterity all those very, very interesting and adventurous times in IndoChina, and particularly, Vietnam, that spanned the initial period of the region's development between January 1988 and January 2007.

Don't Get in Her Way!

C.A. Jones

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